

**Rewriting Historical Narratives**  
**In Neo-Victorian Fiction**

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the contemporary form of neo-Victorian fiction in relation to both contemporary and Victorian literature. I argue that neo-Victorian fiction should be considered in relation to but as distinct from postmodern literary practices. Although neo-Victorian texts are often considered postmodern, I argue that they must be differentiated from the categories of postmodernism. Whilst interrogating history, often considered a postmodern characteristic, neo-Victorian fiction retains a commitment to the historical specificity of the Victorian era. The interrogation of history undertaken in these texts is intimately connected to Victorian forms of historical narratives. The first chapter raises the crucial questions of the thesis through an examination of two neo-Victorian texts: *Possession* and 'The Conjugal Angel'. Questions such as whether neo-Victorian fictions are historical novels; what the role of historical figures is within these texts; and the relationship between Victorian and neo-Victorian fiction. This last issue is explored through analysing the process of ventriloquism in these texts, focusing on the incorporation of both Victorian and pseudo-Victorian texts. Chapter 2 examines theoretical frameworks of postmodernism, revealing the limitations of such models for neo-Victorian fiction. It also positions neo-Victorian fiction in relation to Victorian fictional modes, particularly realism but also the Victorian forms of sensation, detective and historical fiction. The subsequent chapters locate various historical narratives in their Victorian context and explore their treatment within neo-Victorian fiction. Chapter 3 discusses *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and 'Morpho Eugenia' and examines the role of meta-narratives in both Victorian and contemporary society, particularly Darwinism and Marxism. This chapter also addresses the grand narrative of literary history in its consideration of the double relationship between Victorian and neo-Victorian literature, illustrated through a detailed examination of both Victorian and neo-Victorian endings. Chapter 4 explores the issues surrounding genealogical narratives in *The Quincunx* as well as its engagement with the late-Victorian genre of detective fiction. Chapter 5 considers *The Biographer's Tale* and *The Dark Clue* in relation to Victorian forms of biography and developments in photography. Chapter 6 addresses the continued presence of the past, through both spiritualism and literature, in *Possession* and 'The Conjugal Angel'. This thesis investigates the Victorians' purpose in contemporary culture. Yet it does not reduce the Victorian era to merely a forerunner of postmodernism; rather, like the texts it discusses, it locates Victorian forms within their specific cultural context and analyses both the continuities and discontinuities between the two centuries. I propose that neo-Victorian fictions force a reassessment of the cultural legacies of the Victorian era. Analysing these texts in terms of their Victorian context reveals the limitations of categories such as postmodernism and the teleological narratives of literary history. Consequently, I do not evaluate neo-Victorian fiction as either an improvement upon or degradation of Victorian literature; rather I consider them as historically distinct forms that are illuminated by being considered alongside each other.



## Signed Declaration

This thesis has been entirely written by myself and, except for ideas and passages properly acknowledged in the text, is all my own work.

An early version of Chapter 5 appeared as 'Victorian Biography and *The Biographer's Tale*' in *Ecloga* 3 (2003) <http://www.strath.ac.uk/ecloga/Hadley.htm>.

The ideas presented in Chapter 6 also appeared as 'Spectres of the Past: A. S. Byatt's Victorian Ghost Stories' in *Victorians Institute Journal* 31 (2003): 85-99. The publication of both these articles was approved by my supervisor.

Signature:

# Contents

Acknowledgements	v
List of Abbreviations	vi
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter One</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>Echoing the Past: Ventriloquising Victorian Voices</b>	
<b>Chapter Two</b>	<b>74</b>
<b>Locating the Past: The Context of Neo-Victorian Fiction</b>	
<b>Chapter Three</b>	<b>127</b>
<b>Narrating the Past: Darwinian and Marxist Narratives</b>	
<b>Chapter Four</b>	<b>183</b>
<b>Decoding the Past: Genealogical Narratives in <i>The Quincunx</i></b>	
Diagram 1 'Huffam Family Tree'	223
Diagram 2 'Heraldic Quincunxes'	224
Diagram 3 'Coloured Quincunxes'	225
<b>Chapter Five</b>	<b>226</b>
<b>Memorialising the Past: Biography and Photography</b>	
<b>Chapter Six</b>	<b>270</b>
<b>Resurrecting the Past: Neo-Victorian Fiction and Spiritualism</b>	
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>298</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>304</b>

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## List of Abbreviations

- ‘AA’ Charles Palliser, ‘Author’s Afterword,’ *The Quincunx: The Inheritance of John Huffam* (London: Penguin, 1990) 1203-1221
- BT A. S. Byatt, *The Biographer’s Tale* (London: Vintage, 2001)
- ‘CA’ A. S. Byatt, ‘The Conjugal Angel,’ *Angels and Insects* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992)
- DC James Wilson, *The Dark Clues: A Novel of Suspense* (London: Faber, 2001)
- FL John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (London: Pan, 1987)
- ‘ME’ A. S. Byatt, ‘Morpho Eugenia,’ *Angels and Insects* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992)
- P A. S. Byatt, *Possession: A Romance* (London: Vintage, 1991)
- Q Charles Palliser, *The Quincunx: The Inheritance of John Huffam* (London: Penguin, 1990)

## Introduction

BBC adaptations of nineteenth-century novels have long been popular with the viewing public, demonstrating the fascination the Victorian era holds for contemporary society, and the recent *North and South* (2004) proved to be no exception to this rule. Viewer's responses to *North and South* suggestively foreground the appeal the Victorians hold in the contemporary imagination. They talk of an accurate depiction of a bygone era which is imbued with a nostalgic appeal; especially regarding attitudes towards sex. Comments such as 'Alas, we no longer live in a time of such raw and powerfully evoked emotions. We can but dream!' and 'As for the romance – how much more impact does it have than the “in your face whether you like it or not” modern screenplays of today' reinforce the assumption that the Victorians experienced sexual desire more keenly because it was repressed.<sup>1</sup> In an essay on film depictions of the nineteenth century Virginia Blum argues that 'it is the repression itself we were after all along, the empty form that conveys with it a sense of the sexuality that we seem to feel ebbed with the passing of the Victorians'.<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1976) proclaimed that the repression of sexuality in the Victorian era was actually part of an entire discourse committed to sexuality, prompting a re-examination of sexuality in Victorian literature and society. Film adaptations both respond to and contribute to a nostalgic reconstruction of the Victorian era as a time of sexual innocence. Yet, paradoxically, they are also trapped by the contradictory desire to witness the passion

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<sup>1</sup> Nisaa (Scotland) commenting on episode 2 and Melloyd (Uxbridge) commenting on episode 3. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/drama/northandsouth/>.

<sup>2</sup> Virginia L. Blum, 'The Return to Repression: Filming the Nineteenth Century', Jane Austen and Co.: Remaking the Past in Contemporary Culture, eds. Suzanne R. Pucci and James Thompson (Albany: State U of New York P, 2003) 157-178, 159.



and emotion believed to be barely contained beneath the high-collars and stiff petticoats. Sandy Welch succumbed to this impulse in her rewriting of the final understated scene of Gaskell's novel as a passionate encounter on a railway station platform. This interest in the Victorians' sex-lives is one of the main impulses prompting many contemporary depictions of the Victorian era and manifests in two modes, either depicting the Victorians as sexually repressed or recuperating their sexuality. Yet these apparently contradictory desires amongst viewers are actually part of the discourse of Victorian sexual repression and innocence and, as in *North and South*, can coexist within a single cultural text. Contemporary audiences want to witness the repression of sexuality as well as the underlying passion that repression both restricts and produces. Such depictions confirm both the view that the Victorians occupy a different, simpler time and that, despite differences in historical circumstances, they are fundamentally the same as modern subjects. These two impulses, to assert the Victorians' difference and at the same time their similarity, provide the motivation for many contemporary engagements with the Victorian era.

It is not just the Victorians who are reconstructed to fit a narrative of lost simplicity, the Victorian novel is equally seen as being more simplistic than the sophisticated and deliberately self-conscious forms of literary postmodernism. Such a narrative serves to emphasise the supposedly innovative and experimental elements of postmodern fiction. Thus, in introductory guides to postmodernism the Victorian novel is positioned in opposition to the more sophisticated forms of postmodern fiction. Glen Ward asserts that '[...] postmodern metafiction questions realism from within: it does not pretend to offer transparent windows on the world, "slices of life", or illusions of "authenticity". By drawing attention to its own status as an artefact, it

instead admits that it can offer no objective, complete or universally valid representations'.<sup>3</sup> Ward implicitly constructs Victorian realist fiction as naively unaware of its own status as an artefact and confident of presenting 'objective, complete or universally valid representations' of the world. The supposedly naïve and traditional elements of Victorian novels are often seen as a positive attribute by many readers, as is attested to by the continued popularity of nineteenth-century novels. Indeed, many readers enjoy Victorian fiction because of its perceived depiction of life-like characters and engaging plot, elements seen to be missing from postmodern fiction. Thus, a recent thread on the Victoria research discussion forum encouraged contributors to identify the characters they empathised with from Victorian fiction. One contributor even revealed that her identification with Esther Summerson was so great that 'I still count her among my friends in my mental universe'.<sup>4</sup> Such a response reveals a prevalent conception that characters in Victorian novels are in some sense more real than those in postmodern fiction; indeed, it is hard to imagine a similar discussion on characters from postmodern novels. Indeed, part of the interest in adaptations and sequels of classic Victorian texts stems from this sense that characters in Victorian novels in some way have an existence beyond the confines of the novel.

The desire to identify with characters from Victorian fiction suggests a belief that the Victorian era is knowable through its figures, that if you understand the people you will understand the period. Such a belief was installed by Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918) which presented biographical portraits of four

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<sup>3</sup> Glen Ward, *Postmodernism* (London: Hodder Headline, 1997) 32. See also Christopher Butler, *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002) 73.

<sup>4</sup> Anne B. Rodrick, 'Empathetic Reading Experiences of Nineteenth-Century Novels,' online posting, 15 Nov. 2004, Victoria, 16 Feb. 2005 <https://listserv.indiana.edu/cgi-bin/wa-jub.exe?A2=ind0411c&L=victoria&T=0&F=&S=&P=1130>.

famous Victorian figures as a route to understanding the Victorian era. Obviously such an assumption is problematic since “the Victorians” do not exist as a homogenous entity. Whilst for ease of discussion I will refer to “the Victorians” “the Victorian novel”, “the Victorian era” and “the nineteenth century” I do not intend to reconceive these categories as fixed and monolithic. Rather I will be problematising such generalised and stereotypical portraits through my discussion of “neo-Victorian” fictions, which are keen to avoid presenting such a stereotypical and monolithic portrait of the Victorian era.

The majority of contemporary responses to the nineteenth century, including the examples above, are nostalgic. In her book *On Longing* (1984) Susan Stewart examines what she describes as the ‘social disease of nostalgia’.<sup>5</sup> Stewart’s account is concerned with the presence of nostalgia in contemporary society, a period in which ‘history itself appears as a commodity’.<sup>6</sup> The commodification of history is apparent in the contemporary interest in the Victorians through the marketing of nineteenth-century novels and the proliferation of cross-genre marketing, as with the book tie-ins for the film and television adaptations of Victorian novels. In neo-Victorian fiction, the Victorian era is not naively absorbed into the modern period, nor is it merely rejected as inadequate for postmodernity. Rather the self-consciousness of the contemporary novel finds a fertile field for inquiry in the Victorian era because of its own self-consciousness. Victorian intellectuals were very conscious of their position within history, in terms of both their relationship to the past and their anticipation of the future. This self-consciousness relates to the perceived confident belief in the ideology of progress which held that the Victorian

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<sup>5</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1984) ix.

<sup>6</sup> Stewart, xiii.

era was an advanced stage of the development of human civilisation and also optimistically anticipated the continued improvement in the future: 'We *are* on the threshold of a great time [...] It is the age of great expectation and unwearied striving after better things'.<sup>7</sup> This historical consciousness fuelled a desire to document the present which, although evident prior to the Victorian era, gathered momentum during that period. Whilst the census was introduced in response to eighteenth-century population debates, it was during the Victorian era that it became formalised into what is still recognisable as the modern census. Although a census initially appears to be concerned with the present in documenting the current state of society and enabling the development of social policies in response to its findings, it is also a response to their position in history. Censuses enabled Victorians to quantify what had been achieved during their era as well as to leave behind documentation by which posterity could judge the extent of their advance from the Victorian era.

Neo-Victorian fiction engages with this Victorian self-consciousness and examines the means by which the nineteenth century became narratable, both to itself and to modern society. These texts examine the Victorian narratives of geological and historical time, in particular those forwarded by Darwin and Marx. They also explore Victorian forms of historical narratives in their treatment of biography, genealogy and photography. Neo-Victorian texts are interested both in providing a narrative account of the Victorian era and in examining Victorian narratives of history.

This mode of fiction, which self-consciously engages with the Victorian era, has been identified by a number of writers, often those who themselves contribute to

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<sup>7</sup> Frederic Harrison, 'A Few Words About the Nineteenth Century,' 1882, rptd. *The Choice of Books and Other Literary Pieces* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1886) 417-447, 425.



the genre; but there have been few attempts to conceptualise this as a distinct and significant genre.<sup>8</sup> Considerations of neo-Victorian fiction are either incorporated into volumes that address the current cultural fascination with the Victorians, or volumes concerned with Victorian literature itself. Of the first type, John Kucich and Dianne Sadoff's collection *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth-Century* (2000) and the more recent *Functions of Victorian Culture at the Present Time* (2002), edited by Christine Kreuger, are significant examples. The use of the term "culture" in both titles indicates their interest in a broad range of topics and they incorporate a diverse range of essays, including stage productions of Victorian life; Victoriana home decorating; Oscar Wilde and postmodern gay identity; and television and film adaptations of Victorian novels.<sup>9</sup> Whilst both collections contain at least one essay addressing fiction these tend to focus on either one text, one author, or one specific form of neo-Victorian fiction.<sup>10</sup> These essays examine isolated instances of neo-Victorian fiction rather than engage in a sustained analysis of neo-Victorian fiction as a coherent mode of contemporary fiction. Of the second type, the most significant example is probably *A Companion to the Victorian Novel* (2002), which concludes with an essay entitled 'The Afterlife of the Victorian

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<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, A. S. Byatt, 'Ancestors' in *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2000) 72.

<sup>9</sup> See Sharon Aronofsky Weltman 'Victorians on Broadway at the Present Time: John Ruskin's Life on Stage,' *Functions of Victorian Culture at the Present Time*, ed. Christine L. Kreuger (Athens: Ohio UP, 2002) 79-94. On home decorating see Miriam Bailin, 'The New Victorians,' *Functions of Victorian Culture*, 37-46. For a discussion of Oscar Wilde see Jesse Matz, 'Wilde Americana,' *Functions of Victorian Culture*, 65-78 and Shelton Waldrep 'The Uses and Misuses of Oscar Wilde,' *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century*, eds. John Kucich and Dianne F. Sadoff, (London: U of Minnesota P, 2000) 49-63. On television and film adaptations of Victorian texts see Susan Lurie 'A Twentieth-Century Portrait: Jane Campion's American Girl,' *Victorian Afterlife*, 83-100; and Ellen Bayuk Rosenman, 'More Stories about Clothing and Furniture: Realism and Bad Commodities,' *Functions of Victorian Culture*, 47-62, which discusses the BBC adaptation of *Middlemarch*.

<sup>10</sup> Jay Clayton 'Hacking the Nineteenth Century,' *Victorian Afterlife*, 186-210; Hilary M. Schor 'Sorting, Morphing and Mourning: A. S. Byatt Ghostwrites Victorian Fiction,' *Victorian Afterlife*, 234-251; Kate Lonsdale 'Rounding Up the Usual Suspect: Echoing Jack the Ripper,' *Functions of Victorian Culture*, 97-114.



Novel: Novels about Novels'.<sup>11</sup> The format of this volume precludes a sustained engagement with the genre of neo-Victorian fiction; the essay's position at the end of a volume devoted to Victorian literature implies that neo-Victorian fiction is not a separate genre but rather a continuation of the concerns and techniques of Victorian fiction. Although neo-Victorian fiction cannot be considered in isolation from the Victorian forms it engages with it does not merely continue the forms of Victorian fiction. Rather neo-Victorian fiction critically interrogates those forms within their specific historical location. This commitment to the specificity of the historical locale extends to these texts' own context; they are aware of the differences between the Victorian and twentieth-century contexts and so recognise the limitations of the Victorian forms for the contemporary cultural moment. The next chapter will begin by locating these texts within the contemporary cultural context of postmodernism.

Although neo-Victorian fiction has begun to be recognised and identified as a prevalent mode of contemporary fiction there have been relatively few attempts to understand it as a distinct form and to explain how it differs from other, similar, fictional modes. As I have shown, essays that do address neo-Victorian fiction tend to focus on a single text or author in isolation from other texts belonging to this mode of fiction. Sally Shuttleworth endeavours to avoid this mistake by considering two neo-Victorian texts which she positions as part of a wider sub-set of contemporary fiction which she designates 'retro-Victorian' fiction. Shuttleworth's article seeks to account for the appearance in 1992 of two texts which 'dramatise the Darwinian

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<sup>11</sup> Anne Humphreys, 'The Afterlife of the Victorian Novel: Novels about Novels,' *A Companion to the Victorian Novel*, eds. Patrick Brantlinger and William B. Thesing (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002) 442-457. See also Kate Flint, 'Plotting the Victorians: Narrative, Post-Modernism, and Contemporary Fiction,' *Writing and Victorianism*, ed. J. B. Bullen (London and New York: Longman, 1997) 286-305; and Robin Gilmour, 'Using the Victorians: the Victorian Age in Contemporary Fiction,' *Rereading Victorian Fiction*, eds. Alice Jenkins and Juliet John (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000) 189-200.

moment in Victorian history': A. S. Byatt's 'Morpho Eugenia' and Graham Swift's *Ever After*.<sup>12</sup> Shuttleworth argues that retro-Victorian texts combine 'an informed post-modern self-consciousness in their interrogation of the relationship between fiction and history' with 'an absolute, non-ironic, fascination with the details of the period, and with our relations to it'.<sup>13</sup> Shuttleworth's definition of retro-Victorian fiction is similar to the claims I am making, that neo-Victorian texts both interrogate the past and yet remain committed to the details of that past. Yet Shuttleworth fails to account for what I consider the crucial element of neo-Victorian fiction, the impact of the Victorian context on the interrogation of the past. Furthermore, whilst Shuttleworth does attempt to make some broader claims about retro-Victorian fiction, her essay only considers a subset of this in its focus on texts that display a preoccupation with Darwinian ideas. Whilst I recognise that Darwin, and his theories, provide a focal point for many neo-Victorian texts, and indeed I discuss this in depth in Chapter 3, there are many other aspects of Victorian life and literature with which neo-Victorian texts engage.<sup>14</sup> Thus, Shuttleworth's account, rather than opening up the genre of retro-Victorian fiction, actually limits it to a single issue.

Moreover, I find Shuttleworth's classification problematic since it carries connotations of a nostalgic return to the past, a passive process of emptying out the semantic content in favour of the images of the past. Shuttleworth's use of the term "retro" renders her argument complicit with Jameson's critique of postmodernism; indeed she explicitly refers to Jameson's account of 'the appetite for "retro" so

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<sup>12</sup> Sally Shuttleworth, 'Natural History: The Retro-Victorian Novel,' *The Third Culture: Literature and Science*, ed. Elinor S. Shaffer (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1998) 253-268, 253.

<sup>13</sup> Shuttleworth, 253.

<sup>14</sup> Kelly A. Marsh's article is similarly limited to only one area of neo-Victorian fiction, 'The Neo-Sensation Novel: A Contemporary Genre in the Victorian Tradition,' *Philological Quarterly* 74 (1995): 99-123.

evident in the fashion and advertising industry at present, where styles of the past swiftly replace one another, without any sense of the cultural and social baggage they had previously carried'.<sup>15</sup> Shuttleworth claims that "retro-Victorian" fiction does not partake in this process since it displays 'a deep commitment to recreating the detailed texture of an age, to tracing the economic and social determinants which might structure these imaginary lives'.<sup>16</sup> Yet in retaining the term "retro" in her designation of this fictional mode, she implies that these texts are part of the wider "retro" movement as identified by Jameson. To avoid this, and to preserve a sense of an active process that eschews a simplistic nostalgic approach, I have opted for the term "neo-Victorian" instead of the more value-laden "retro-Victorian".

In very broad terms, I define neo-Victorian fiction as contemporary fiction that engages, at either the level of plot, structure, or both, with Victorian conventions and/or Victorian subjects.<sup>17</sup> Whilst it is important to retain a sense of the range of neo-Victorian fictions it is necessary, for the purpose of this thesis, to refine and delimit this definition. Neo-Victorian texts adopt a range of approaches from historical romances which use the Victorian past as "costume", merely a historical background for the action, to addressing the omissions of Victorian literature in general and to engaging with a specific Victorian text. I am not interested in the simplistic use of the past as costume for the present but in more complex

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<sup>15</sup> Shuttleworth, 255.

<sup>16</sup> Shuttleworth, 255.

<sup>17</sup> Dana Shiller separates these into two categories: '[1] Some of these texts imitate Victorian literary conventions, either by creating altogether new stories or by reimagining specific Victorian novels from a new angle [...] [2] while others are more overtly "postmodern" in style and tone, but concern themselves with Victorian subjects', 'Neo-Victorian Fiction: Reinventing the Victorians' (diss., U of Washington, 1995) 1. This definition is problematic since these two categories can, and indeed in the texts I am considering do, exist within a single text. Moreover, Shiller clings to the traditional concepts of "tone" and "style", yet applies them to postmodernism, which reacts against such liberal humanist approaches to literature. She never identifies exactly what she means by such phrases as 'more overtly "postmodern" in style and tone'.

engagements with the Victorian era and its forms of historical and fictional narratives. In the texts I discuss, the engagement with the Victorian past prompts a complex exploration of the relationship between history and fiction; they use fictional narratives to explore the boundaries and forms of historical narration. Consequently, they are not straightforward historical novels but rather, in Linda Hutcheon's phrase, "historiographic metafiction". In broad terms, Hutcheon defines historiographic metafiction as texts which not only represent the past but also metafictionally comment upon the past that is being represented. Hutcheon's concept, its relationship to the postmodern challenging of this boundary and its applicability to neo-Victorian fiction will be explored in more detail in Chapter 2. In particular, I will indicate the extent to which Hutcheon's definition needs to be refined to account for the impact of the specific Victorian location in these texts.

Before considering the theoretical issues involved in a study of neo-Victorian fiction I need to set the boundaries for the term and explain the absences and omissions within my thesis. Since I conceive of neo-Victorian fiction in terms of Hutcheon's definition of "historiographic metafiction" any text which unquestioningly evokes the Victorian era or in which it is merely a background that is incidental to the story will not be considered. This excludes not only the whole genre of historical romances set in the Victorian era but also a vast array of neo-Victorian fictions that do not engage in a self-conscious interrogation of historiography. One such text, which has received considerable critical attention, is Michèle Roberts's *The Mistressclass* (2003). Apart from the lack of concern with the modes of narrating the past, the Victorian elements of the novel remain disconnected from the contemporary setting which dominates most of the narrative.



Similarly, although highly self-conscious, Michel Faber's hugely popular *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002) does not explicitly address the nature of historical narratives and can be seen as more interested in writing the sex back in to Victorian fiction.

Although the major limiting factor in the selection of texts was obviously their status as historiographic metafiction there were also other considerations. This thesis does not consider texts that involve physical time-travel, in which a character is transported back to the Victorian era. Philippa Pearce's *Tom's Midnight Garden* (1958) is the tale of a young boy in the 1950s who goes to stay in a Victorian house and is transported back to the past when he enters the garden at night. Despite being written for children, Pearce's novel addresses issues of how we narrate the past; the relationship between the present and the past and the opposition between the "official" history of encyclopaedias and the private histories of individuals. Whilst Pearce's text is obviously an example of the contemporary interest in the Victorian era, as well as being a contribution to current debates surrounding historical discourses, I am more interested in neo-Victorian fictions which enact "time-travel" at the level of narrative style and technique, rather than plot. A prominent example of narrative time-travel in neo-Victorian fiction is David Lodge's *Nice Work* (1988), which transposes the conventions of a Victorian industrial novel onto a 1980s campus novel. Lodge's novel questions the effectiveness of these conventions for the post-industrial society of Thatcherite Britain and so focuses on contemporary society rather than engaging with the Victorian era in its own terms. *Possession* (1990) and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) are also involved in a process of narrative time-travel but these texts clearly address both the nature of the relationship



between the present and the past and questions concerning how it is that we narrate that past.

Another limitation relates to the novels' political stance. This thesis does not consider novels with overt political intentions, which attempt to make Victorian literature politically correct, as such a project is implicated in the suspect attempt to recuperate the Victorians as "safe" and "familiar". Under the category of politically inclined texts I include such diverse undertakings as post-colonial, feminist and queer rewritings of Victorian literature. Thus, I am considering neither *Jack Maggs* (1997), Peter Carey's post-colonial rewriting of Dickens' *Great Expectations*, nor *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), Jean Rhys's prequel to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* set in the plantations of Jamaica and adopting the perspective of Rochester's "mad" first wife, Bertha Mason. Similarly, I am not considering the hugely popular novels of Sarah Waters, which strive to recuperate a specifically lesbian experience of Victorian Britain. These fictional texts correspond to a critical movement which seeks to highlight and remedy the absences of Victorian fiction by re-reading them through the corresponding critical frameworks.<sup>18</sup> Such fictional and critical texts could be accused of erasing the historical specificity of the Victorian era in an attempt to render them compatible with contemporary attitudes. Although the texts I discuss do not ignore such issues, they are not the focal point of the narratives which insist on the singularity of the Victorian past.

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<sup>18</sup> On feminist approaches to Victorian literature see Sandra Gilbert & Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979); Nancy Armstrong, *Desire & Domestic Fiction* (1987); Barbara Harman & Susan Meyer, eds., *The New 19thC: Feminist Readings of Underread Victorian Fiction* (1996). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's seminal text *Between Men* (1985) addresses the issue of homosexual desire in Victorian literature, whilst Patrick Brantlinger's *Rule of Darkness* (1988) and Anne McClintock's *Imperial Leather* (1995) consider the colonial implications of Victorian literature.

Another reason for excluding neo-Victorian texts that are post-colonial in orientation is my decision to focus on texts which deal with the Victorian era in its British context. Obviously the Victorian era was the age of Empire and so aspects of Victorian Britain, both political and cultural, affected other countries, not only their colonies. Yet the colonial aspect of this relationship affects the presentation of the Victorian era in texts from the former colonies. Consequently, I have decided to limit my attention to novelists who engage with the Victorian era in its specifically British context. My justification for this actually comes from an Australian author of neo-Victorian fiction, Peter Carey. In an interview with Eleanor Wachtel, Carey states that 'Australia kept on being Victorian long after the British stopped being Victorian'.<sup>19</sup> Hence, the engagement with the Victorian past within post-colonial literature will take different forms and have different implications than those from within a British context. Accordingly, the neo-Victorian novels I am discussing are all set in Britain, engage with the traditions of British Victorian literature and (with the exception of *The Quincunx*) are written by British authors.

The neo-Victorian texts I examine are: John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), Charles Palliser's *The Quincunx: The Inheritance of John Huffam* (1989), A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1990), *Angels and Insects* (1992), and *The Biographer's Tale* (2000) and James Wilson's *The Dark Clue: A Novel of Suspense* (2001). The novels I focus on in this thesis share several common features: they are all interested in the British context of Victorianism; all incorporate either Victorian settings or characters; all address the Victorian era in its

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<sup>19</sup> Eleanor Wachtel. "'We Really Can Make Ourselves Up': An Interview With Peter Carey." *Australian and New Zealand Studies in Canada* 9 (1993): 103-5, 104. See also Simon Gikandi, 'The Embarrassment of Victorianism: Colonial Subjects and the Lure of Englishness,' *Victorian Afterlife*, eds. Kucich and Sadoff, 157-85.

own terms rather than trying to recuperate it for a specifically political agenda and they all enact a form of literary time-travel at the level of narrative. Moreover, the overriding characteristic common to all these texts is their interest in modes of historical knowledge and my analysis of these novels centres on this aspect of their engagement with the Victorian era. Neo-Victorian texts not only interrogate the Victorian modes of narrating the past, but also the narrative forms we use for narrating the Victorian past. Thus, they engage both with the Victorian forms of biography and with the adoption of a biographical narrative which narrates the Victorian past through the narratives of its central figures, both historical and fictional.

This selection provides a cross section of neo-Victorian fiction, which spans several decades, ranging from the first manifestation of the genre, Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, to more recent contributions such as Wilson's *The Dark Clue*.<sup>20</sup> I consider the two canonical texts of this genre, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and *Possession*, alongside texts whose status as neo-Victorian fictions might not be immediately apparent, such as *The Biographer's Tale*. Although both *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and *Possession* have already received considerable scholarly and critical attention, as the canonical texts of this genre, which are hugely popular with the reading public, they cannot be excluded from any discussion of neo-Victorian fiction.<sup>21</sup> Yet I felt it was also important to consider texts that have received little (*The Biographer's Tale*, *Angels and Insects*, *The Quincunx*) or no critical attention (*The Dark Clue*). In addition to addressing a

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<sup>20</sup> As Ryan remarks 'The French lieutenant's woman could be a grandmother by now.' Alan Peter Ryan, 'Neo-Victorian novels re-create a familiar world,' *The Chicago Tribune*, 9 Nov. 2003: 1.

<sup>21</sup> Both *Possession* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* have achieved best-seller status and their popularity was both confirmed and extended by their adaptation into films.

range of neo-Victorian texts, I analyse these texts as, and alongside other, historiographic metafiction, enabling me to focus on the particularity of neo-Victorian fiction, which is often overlooked in considerations of individual texts. Finally, my decision to discuss three of A. S. Byatt's neo-Victorian texts reflects the prominent position I feel she has earned within this genre. Although the sub-genre of neo-Victorian fiction originated with John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the phenomenon really gathers momentum after the publication, and subsequent Booker Prize, of A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* in 1990, which foregrounded neo-Victorian fiction in both critical discussions of contemporary fiction and in the mind of the average reader.<sup>22</sup> Of the texts I discuss, three were published during the late 1980s and early 1990s: *The Quincunx* (1989), *Possession* (1990) and *Angels and Insects* (1992). What is it, then, about the late 1980s and early 1990s that fostered this upsurge in fictional representation of the Victorian era?

1980s neo-Victorianism should be understood as, at least in part, reacting to the political deployment of Victorian values by Margaret Thatcher and the Conservative Party.<sup>23</sup> In a speech delivered to the Glasgow Chamber of Commerce in 1983, Margaret Thatcher defined her conception of "Victorian values" as 'honesty and thrift and reliability and hard work and a sense of responsibility for your fellow men [...]'.<sup>24</sup> Yet she claimed that these 'are not simply Victorian values. They do not go out of date. They are not tied to any particular place or century. [...] they are

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<sup>22</sup> See, for instance, Shuttleworth 'Natural History: The Retro-Victorian Novel', 253.

<sup>23</sup> One of the touchstones of this recuperation of Victorian values was the republication of Samuel Smiles' 1859 *Self-Help*, the introduction to which was written by the Secretary of State for Education and Science, Sir Keith Joseph. Samuel Smiles, *Self-Help, with illustrations of Conduct and Perseverance*, Abridged by George Bull, Introduction, Sir Keith Joseph (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1986).

<sup>24</sup> Margaret Thatcher, Speech to Glasgow Chamber of Commerce (bicentenary), Holiday Inn, Glasgow, 28 Jan. 1983. 11 Jan. 2005  
<http://www.margaretthatcher.org/Speeches/displaydocument.asp?docid=105244&doctype=1>.



part of the enduring principles of the Western world. And if we just write them off and wave them goodbye, we are destroying the best of our heritage'.<sup>25</sup> The rhetoric of Thatcher's speech demonstrates that her championing of Victorian values was underlined by a desire to assert continuity with the national past. These values provided a justification for many of the social, political and educational policies introduced during the Thatcher years. The policies of privatisation and the decrease of state intervention were seen to have their roots in nineteenth-century economic policies, in particular that of "laissez-faire."<sup>26</sup> Yet the latter part of the nineteenth century was also a period of immense social reform, with legislation in such areas as employment, education, and sexual morality. Thus, Thatcher's espousal of Victorian values is based on an over-simplification of the Victorian era and a prioritisation of those values that best served Conservative Party policies. As Stefan Collini observes, however, '[...] in so far as they bear any relation to the actualities of Victorian attitudes, ["Victorian values"] call up those attitudes that were given political expression by the Liberal rather than the Tory Party.'<sup>27</sup>

In addition to economic policy, the call for a return to Victorian values was particularly acute in the arena of morality, especially as affecting the family. Many of the social ills of the late 1980s, such as truancy, crime, and anti-social behaviour, were considered as consequences of the deterioration of the "nuclear family" and the values it instilled. The nuclear family is seen to have emerged during the Victorian

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<sup>25</sup> *ibid.* On Thatcher's concept of "Victorian Values" see also Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Demoralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values* (London: The IEA Health and Welfare Unit, 1995) 4; and Gordon Marsden, 'Introduction,' *Victorian Values: Personalities and Perspectives in Nineteenth-Century Society*, ed. Gordon Marsden (New York and London: Longman, 1990) 1-12, 2.

<sup>26</sup> See, for instance, Anthony Seldon and Daniel Collings, *Britain Under Thatcher* (Essex: Pearson Education Limited, 2000) 2-3; 68.

<sup>27</sup> Stefan Collini, 'Victorian Values: From the Clapham Set to the Clapham Omnibus,' *English Pasts: Essays in history and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999) 103-115, 107.



era, a period that is considered to have been increasingly concerned with the family and the private sphere.<sup>28</sup> Again, the picture that is presented of the Victorian family is based on an over-generalisation of the dominant stereotypes. That neo-Victorian fiction is reacting to this idealised version of the Victorian family is evident in the treatment of issues such as illegitimacy and incest in these texts. *The Quincunx* and *Possession* are both concerned with the fate of the illegitimate child in Victorian society. In Byatt's version, Maia only figures peripherally and is subsumed back into the nexus of "proper" family relationships through her adoption by her aunt and uncle. Although *Possession* seems to resolve the challenge the illegitimate figure poses to the conception of Victorian families it actually undermines it since Maia's case is shown to be quite common and thus the façade of legitimacy and propriety is revealed as covering transgressive relationships. *The Quincunx* focuses on the question of illegitimacy more centrally since there are doubts concerning the legitimacy of not only the main character but also many of the other characters. Palliser's treatment of illegitimacy is explicitly associated with its exploration of Victorian modes of family history and this idea forms the substance of Chapter 4. Again, Palliser's text subverts the official versions of family history by revealing the hidden narratives that the genealogical accounts conceal. Thus, both texts can be seen as responding to the promotion of Victorian values by Thatcher's government and attempting to reveal a more historically accurate version of Victorian family life.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> See, for example, David Popenoe, *Life Without Father: Compelling New Evidence That Fatherhood and Marriage Are Indispensable for the Good of Children and Society* (London & New York: The Free Press, Martin Kessler Books, 1996) Chapter 3 'Victorian Fathers and the Rise of the Modern Nuclear Family', 81-108.

<sup>29</sup> In the 'Author's Afterword' Palliser remarks that reviewers 'made much of the fact that the twelve years I spent writing [the book] coincided roughly with the period of Margaret Thatcher's

These texts' engagement with the boundaries between history and fiction can also be seen as a response to the political climate of the 1980s. Following the passing of the Education Reform Act in 1988 the Conservative government sought to implement a National Curriculum for all levels of school education; a move which prompted much debate concerning the role of the state in education, what subjects should be compulsory and what should be taught within those subjects. These issues were most fiercely debated within the subject area of history, with numerous articles, not confined to the educational press, entering the arena. As historiographic metafiction, the neo-Victorian texts under consideration overtly engage with questions concerning the nature of the past, how we come to know the past and the forms of historical writing. Thus, they are engaging with similar issues to those raised in educational debates concerning the formation of a national curriculum for history.

The debate over history teaching concentrated on the question of how history should be taught and was broadly divided into two camps: the "traditionalists" who favoured a facts-based approach and the "progressives" who emphasised the importance of skills, and especially promoted the use of "empathy". The emerging "empathy" debate, although not a new problem, raised several issues concerning history that were simultaneously being addressed in the realms of critical theory and contemporary fiction, especially the problematic boundary between history and fiction. The controversy over the role of empathy raised again the question of the boundary between history and literature that had been so fiercely contested in the nineteenth century. Even proponents of the use of empathy in history teaching

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government' although he points out that 'In fact, I had begun it several years before that administration came to power', 'AA', 1220.

recognised that 'It is an imaginative dimension to history which brings it closer to literature and drama than to science and analytical theory'.<sup>30</sup> Detractors charged empathy with deviating from the scientific principle of objectivity in the treatment and presentation of the past: 'Not all historians are happy [...] fearing that the new history stems from personal passions, and therefore threatens to cast aside neutrality and intellectual rigour in its analysis of past events'.<sup>31</sup>

Another issue that is implicated in the empathy debate, and which neo-Victorian fiction also addresses, is the question of whether we should consider the past in terms of its similarity to, or its difference from, the present. The notion that an awareness of history is necessary for an understanding of the present was frequently cited as a justification for the teaching of history.<sup>32</sup> Yet Stewart Deuchar attacks the empathy approach for precisely this presentist perspective. He argues that empathy is not historical since it is based on the assumption of timeless, universal values and consequently erases the historical significance and specificity of any event.<sup>33</sup> An even more damning assessment of the empathy approach is voiced by Norman Stone: 'Students of history need to understand that people in the past had

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<sup>30</sup> Anne Sofer, 'Identity crisis,' *TES* 22 Apr 1988: 128. Detractors from the empathy approach argue that empathy is harmful in historical study, claiming that it 'blurred the boundary between factual recall and fanciful thinking'. Ian Nash, 'Universities attack Sixth form history,' *TES* 9 June 1989: A1.

<sup>31</sup> William Norris, 'Sex through the ages...', *THES* 22 Jan 1988: 10. See also Stewart Deuchar's allegation that whereas 'History used to be the pursuit of truth [,] [i]t is now the pursuit of bias, which is not the same thing at all'. 'Making Sense of the Past,' *TES* 29 Jan 1988: 20.

<sup>32</sup> See Norman Stone, 'Put nuts and bolts back into history,' *The Sunday Times* 13 Mar 1988: B8; David Tytler, 'Baker wants Britain at heart of history teaching,' *The Times* 14 Jan 1989: 5. The Prime Minister explicitly entered this debate during Prime Minister's Question Time on 29 March 1990. In response to Sir John Stokes' call for a return to 'the good old days when we learnt by heart the names of the kings and queens of England [...]', Thatcher replied 'Most of us are expected to learn from experience of history and we cannot do that unless we know it. Children should know the great landmarks of British history and should be taught them at school,' 11 Jan. 2005 <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/search/displaydocument.asp?docid=108048&doctype=1>.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in "'Mickey-Mouse' View of History,' *TES* 13 Jan. 1989: 11.

different beliefs and values, and should not be judged from the point of view of a fifteen-year-old in 1988.’<sup>34</sup>

Neo-Victorian fictions participate in this debate concerning the role of empathy in history since they are aware that history involves imaginative guesswork yet are not interested in asserting universals and manipulating the past to comment on the present. Rather they reassert the historical specificity of the Victorian era, which has been eroded in our cultural consciousness through the numerous stereotypical images with which we have been presented and through the extension of the category “Victorian” to incorporate the “long nineteenth century”.

Neo-Victorian fiction cannot be reduced to a monolithic category but rather encompasses a variety of fictional responses to the Victorian past. Examining such a range of texts allows me to preserve this sense of the various complex approaches in neo-Victorian fiction. Although the overriding concern of neo-Victorian fictions is with the historical specificity of the Victorian past they depict, this operates in different ways in the various texts. Thus, as I will demonstrate in Chapter 1, Fowles’s narrator prioritises Victorian forms of literature over the contemporary ventriloquisms of it. Yet the narrator seeks to assert the experimental nature of his approach by disparaging the forms of Victorian realist narration, a position that is dependent on a simplification of the Victorian realist narrator. In contrast, the other neo-Victorian authors discussed in this thesis seem reluctant to impose such value judgements.

There are also various formal strategies available to neo-Victorian authors. For instance, Byatt’s *Possession* and Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*

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<sup>34</sup> Stone, ‘Put nuts and bolts back into history,’ B8.

incorporate both twentieth- and nineteenth-century elements, although in different ways. Byatt adopts the strategy of dual, interrelated plots, creating a twentieth-century plot that depends upon the nineteenth-century plot. For the majority of the novel the Victorian narrative is only available to the reader through the mediating presence of the twentieth-century characters but there are several occasions when the Victorian events are narrated directly to the reader.<sup>35</sup> In contrast to *Possession*, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* ostensibly has only one plot, set in 1867. The twentieth century is present in the novel, however, through the position of the narrator who, it eventually transpires, occupies an historical moment precisely one hundred years after that of the narrative he is recounting. Although the twentieth-century element of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is generally confined to the position occupied by the narrator, it affects the presentation of the nineteenth century not only through the perspective adopted by the narrator but also in his intrusions into the time of the plot itself.

In contrast, both of the novellas which constitute *Angels and Insects*, Wilson's *The Dark Clue* and Palliser's *The Quincunx* are set entirely within the nineteenth century and are told through the narratives, both oral and written, of the nineteenth-century characters.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, whilst Fowles's narrative clearly displays its adoption of experimental narrative features, often associated with modernist and postmodernist fiction, these novels overtly adopt a nineteenth-century

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<sup>35</sup> These instances are discussed in considerable detail in Chapter 6 in terms of the presence of ghosts in *Possession*.

<sup>36</sup> The majority of reviewers adopt this as the main point of comparison between *Angels and Insects* and Byatt's previous foray into the Victorian world, *Possession*. Whilst most judge it as a deficiency in *Angels and Insects* Marilyn Butler sees it as a positive step, arguing that *Angels and Insects* is 'More fully assured and satisfying than *Possession*, [...] her best work to date' 'The Moth and the medium,' Rev of *Angels and Insects*, by A. S. Byatt, *TLS* 16 Oct. 1992: 22. *The Biographer's Tale*, however, was not judged as positively by some critics; for instance, Ruth Franklin claimed it 'reads like a tired rehash of *Possession*.' 'Inauthentic Fabrics,' Rev. of *The Biographer's Tale* and *On histories and Stories: Selected Essays*, by A. S. Byatt. *The New Republic* 23 Apr. 2001: 37-40, 39.



style through which to portray their narratives. They are involved in a process of ventriloquism, a technique which all of the texts undertake to some extent and which will be considered in more detail in Chapter 1. But these texts are not Victorian novels. Rather, they are neo-Victorian novels written in the twentieth century and as such they cannot escape the historical moment of their production. Consequently, the attempts to recreate the narrative style of the nineteenth century in these texts are subtly permeated by twentieth-century elements. The intrusion of twentieth-century sensibilities is most apparent in the depiction of physical and sexual elements of the characters and so is part of the more general interest in the sex-lives of the Victorians. But, as I will demonstrate in Chapter 2, the neo-Victorian texts I am considering do more than just “sex up” the Victorians, their engagement with sexuality is grounded in the specificity of their Victorian context. Wilson’s *The Dark Clue* not only attempts to recreate a nineteenth-century style in his narrative but actually engages with a specific Victorian text, Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* (1860), providing the fictional characters of that novel with an afterlife. Similarly, Byatt’s ‘The Conjugal Angel’ incorporates substantial passages from Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* and responds to it by presenting Emily Jesse’s perspective. Although the other texts do not engage with an individual Victorian text in the way that ‘The Conjugal Angel’ and *The Dark Clue* do, they all position themselves in relation to Victorian narratives. Thus, for instance, all the texts can be seen to engage with the new mode of detective fiction which emerged and came to prominence during the Victorian era.<sup>37</sup> Byatt’s *The Biographer’s Tale* stands apart from the others as being the text least obviously concerned with the Victorian era. Although the plot of *The*

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<sup>37</sup> This aspect of the texts will be considered in more detail in Chapter 2 and with particular reference to *The Quincunx* in Chapter 4.

*Biographer's Tale* is located almost entirely in the twentieth century the novel engages with Victorian forms of biography and photography and encounters, through biographical texts, the Victorian figure Sir Elmer Bole.

Another important difference between these neo-Victorian fictions concerns their historical locations. As neo-Victorian texts they all obviously engage with the Victorian era, but the term "Victorian" covers not only 64 years of British history but also a broad range of cultural, social and political practices. Indeed, in the cultural imagination, the category "Victorian" has become conterminous with the nineteenth century. In the introduction to their collection *Victorian Afterlife*, Kucich and Sadoff appear to condemn this extension of the category "Victorian" as part of '[...] the groundless postmodern imagination [which] projects a "Victorian feel" into Regency and early high-modern texts alike.'<sup>38</sup> Yet they actually maintain this extended conception of the Victorian era, including engagements with E. M. Forster and Jane Austen in their discussion of neo-Victorianism. Since neo-Victorian fiction is distinguished by virtue of its commitment to the specificity of its historical location, Kucich and Sadoff's acceptance of the long Victorian era is problematic in dealing with these texts.

The neo-Victorian texts I am considering are extremely aware of their historical context and are keen to assert a specifically Victorian past. Moreover, rather than trying to depict the entire period, which would clearly result in broad generalisations and over-simplifications, they re-create a specific moment within Victorian cultural history. This concern for historical specificity and the associated issue of historical accuracy is considered in relation to forms of historical fiction in

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<sup>38</sup> John Kucich and Dianne F. Sadoff, 'Introduction: Histories of the Present,' *Victorian Afterlife*, ix-xxx, xi.

Chapter 2. My position regarding this issue of historical categorisation is similar to that forwarded by these texts. Working within the cultural context of postmodernism, they are clearly aware of the current scepticism towards the past, the notion that it is only accessible through texts. Yet the past they represent is not an entirely imagined past as they insist on its historical specificity.<sup>39</sup> This insistence is, as I will demonstrate in Chapter 2, one of the reasons why the category “postmodernism” is inadequate for these texts. Similarly, whilst accepting that the categories we use to conceive of history are purely fictional conventions I wish to preserve the significance and existence of the Victorian past. Consequently, unlike Kucich and Sadoff, I focus on texts that engage specifically with the Victorian past, rather than the “long Victorian era”.

Palliser’s *The Quincunx* initially appears to be complicit with this view of the Victorian era as synonymous with the nineteenth century; indeed reviewers tend to classify it as a neo-Victorian novel without addressing the question of its precise historical location. The action of Palliser’s novel spans from the early nineteenth century up to the Victorian period and so draws on the popular conception that the Victorian era actually dominated the entire nineteenth century. Although Palliser engages with this approach he does not erase the historical specificity of the era he depicts. *The Quincunx* engages with the Victorian forms of sensation and detective fiction, particularly as exemplified in the novels of Dickens and Collins. Moreover, the narrative focus on genealogy is examined in terms of the specific forms for documenting the individual that were implemented during the Victorian era.

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<sup>39</sup> Scanlan sees this as a national characteristic arguing that ‘Where a Thomas Pynchon or a Joyce Carol Oates might turn to fabulation, almost as if assuming that the past can become whatever we wish it to be, the British novelist is more likely to see that assumption itself as a problem to be critiqued,’ 5-6. Indeed, most of the novelists I discuss are British.

Despite these differences between the neo-Victorian texts I am considering, they all share an overarching interest in the ways in which we come to know about the past and the modes of narrating it in the present. Consequently, my thesis is organised around the various historical narratives with which these texts engage. Whilst there is a certain amount of overlap in the interests of these texts, each chapter will focus on one or two texts in relation to a specific historical narrative. The first chapter raises the issues explored in these texts through a discussion of the process of ventriloquism. Although this process is adopted in all the neo-Victorian texts considered here, this chapter focuses on the incorporation of Victorian and pseudo-Victorian texts in *Possession* and 'The Conjugal Angel'. This discussion leads on to an examination of the problematic relationship between historical and fictional figures within these texts and the implications it has for their status as historical novels. This chapter also explores the nature of the intertextual relationship of Victorian and neo-Victorian fiction and introduces the question of how to evaluate neo-Victorian fiction. The second chapter locates neo-Victorian fiction within various theoretical frameworks. Neo-Victorian fiction is part of a wider fascination with the past within contemporary fiction and so this chapter will begin by considering neo-Victorian fiction within the context of the intellectual and cultural movements of postmodernism. Yet the decision to return to the Victorian past in particular has implications for the approach towards the past within neo-Victorian fiction and thus, as I will argue, these texts cannot simply be accounted for in terms of postmodernism. Chapter 3 discusses *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and 'Morpho Eugenia' and examines the role of meta-narratives in both Victorian and contemporary society, particularly Darwinism and Marxism. This chapter also

addresses the grand narrative of literary history in its consideration of the double relationship between Victorian and neo-Victorian literature, illustrated through a detailed examination of endings in both Victorian and neo-Victorian fiction. Chapter 4 explores the issues surrounding genealogical narratives in *The Quincunx* as well as its engagement with the late-Victorian genre of detective fiction. Chapter 5 considers *The Biographer's Tale* and *The Dark Clue* in relation to Victorian forms of biography and the development of photography. Whilst *Possession* shares an interest in Darwinian, biographical and genealogical narratives I discuss it alongside another of Byatt's texts, 'The Conjugal Angel'. Chapter 6 addresses the continued presence of the past, through both spiritualism and literature, in *Possession* and 'The Conjugal Angel'.



## Chapter One

### Echoing the Past: Ventriloquising Victorian Voices

To elucidate the problematic issues of realism in both Victorian and neo-Victorian fiction I will begin by considering the texts of one of the most prolific and most famous authors of neo-Victorian fiction, A. S. Byatt. The next chapter will provide a more general examination of the issues surrounding metafiction and how they are dealt with in neo-Victorian fiction but in this chapter I will focus my attention on two of Byatt's neo-Victorian texts: *Possession* and 'The Conjugal Angel'. Through an analysis of these texts, this chapter will explore the central questions of this thesis: in what sense are neo-Victorian fictions historical novels? What effect does the incorporation of historical figures into these texts have? What is the nature of the relationship between neo-Victorian fictions and their Victorian intertexts? These questions will be explored through an examination of the most prevalent technique by which the nineteenth century is incorporated into neo-Victorian fiction, a process I have designated ventriloquism.

In neo-Victorian fiction, the relationship between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is experienced through the process of reading. The past is mediated through texts, but is not reduced to textuality as neo-Victorian fiction maintains a commitment to the specificity of the historical referent "the Victorian era". Yet neo-Victorian fictions are also interested in the textual productions of the Victorian era, both in their historical context and their contribution to contemporary perceptions of the Victorians. In establishing this double relationship with Victorian fiction, neo-Victorian texts provide multiple readings of canonical and non-canonical Victorian texts. For instance, as a sequel, *The Dark Clue* re-reads Wilkie Collins's

*The Woman in White*, adopting both its protagonists and its genre conventions. Byatt's *Possession* and 'The Conjugal Angel' engage in this process not only through their status as neo-Victorian texts but also in their incorporation of nineteenth-century texts. Whilst the modes and effects of this incorporation vary depending on the nature of the text incorporated and the status of the figure to whom it is ascribed, all neo-Victorian texts participate in this process of reading the nineteenth century. Byatt's preoccupation with the modes of reading the Victorian past is indicated in the cast of twentieth-century characters in *Possession*, the majority of whom are academics, "professional" readers. These scholars represent conflicting models of reading in their positions as editors, biographers, scholars and literary theorists, and are set in opposition throughout the novel. At the end, these various readers converge to read the letter buried in Ash's grave, suggesting that, for Byatt, the ideal reader is a composite of the various reading models that have been represented.<sup>1</sup> Although 'The Conjugal Angel' does not incorporate such instances of meta-reading it does provide a reading of a canonical nineteenth-century text, Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, forcing the reader to self-consciously question what, and how, they are reading.

In their incorporation of Victorian texts, 'The Conjugal Angel' and *Possession* are involved in a process of ventriloquism, which becomes a metaphor for reading within the texts. The process of ventriloquism provides a commentary on how we read the nineteenth century and its literature, and interrogates the concept of canonicity. Neo-Victorian fiction responds to the continued dominance of the Victorian realist novel in the contemporary imagination. Not only does the Victorian

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<sup>1</sup> This scene will be analysed as a form of séance in Chapter 6. For a discussion of *Possession* as a novel about reading see Chris Walsh, 'Postmodernist Readings: *Possession*,' *The Practice of Reading: Interpreting the Novel*, eds. Chris Walsh & David Alsop (London: Macmillan, 1999): 163-183.

novel dominate the cultural images of the Victorian era but our sense of what constitutes a novel is dominated by the nineteenth-century forms of the genre. As David Lodge observes in his discussion of the “classic realist text”: ‘*Middlemarch* has achieved a unique status as both paradigm and paragon in discussion of the novel as a literary form.’<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the novel was recognised as the dominant literary form by the Victorians themselves: ‘To the England of our own time, it has often enough been remarked, the novel is what the drama was to the England of Shakespeare’s’.<sup>3</sup> The supposed dominance of the realist novel in the Victorian era is undermined by the neo-Victorian resurrection of genres that were equally significant, in particular, the sensation novel and detective fiction. Furthermore, neo-Victorian texts interrogate the modes of realism within their specific Victorian location and thus question the applicability of such forms to the contemporary historical context. In their engagement with the forms of Victorian realism, neo-Victorian texts reveal the limitation of the term “classic realist text” since few Victorian novels actually conform to this conception.<sup>4</sup> Byatt’s texts can be seen as attempting to counter the dominance of the novel and restore Victorian poetry to a central place in our conception of Victorian culture. Paradoxically, Byatt can only achieve this through writing novels/novellas which incorporate poetry, attesting to the continued dominance of the novel form within literature.

In her recreation of Victorian texts Byatt seems to prioritise a direct engagement with the literary text in opposition to literary criticism. Yet in both

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<sup>2</sup> David Lodge, ‘*Middlemarch* and the Idea of the Classic Realist Text,’ *The Nineteenth-Century Novel: Critical Essays and Documents*, ed. Arnold Kettle (London: Heinemann Educational Books, in Association with The Open UP, 1972, Revised ed. 1981) 218-238, 218.

<sup>3</sup> Algernon Charles Swinburne, ‘Emily Brontë’ *Athenaeum* 2903 16 June 1883: 762-63, 762.

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Lodge himself is aware of this as he states ‘it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that for many critics, *Middlemarch* is the *only* truly representative, truly great Victorian novel – all other candidates, including the rest of George Eliot’s fiction, being either too idiosyncratic or too flawed’, ‘*Middlemarch* and the idea of the Classic Realist Text,’ 218.

*Possession* and ‘The Conjugal Angel’ the reader is positioned so as to become highly self-conscious not only about what they are reading but also about the process of reading itself. Moreover, the majority of the nineteenth-century texts in *Possession* are mediated to the reader through the comprehension of the twentieth-century readers, undermining the attempt to distance them from literary criticism. Indeed, *Possession* is dedicated to a critic of Victorian literature, Isobel Armstrong. The inability to engage directly with nineteenth-century texts in *Possession* can be seen as a comment upon contemporary society’s relationship to the literature of the nineteenth century. Whilst it is impossible for a reader to ever approach a text entirely innocently this situation is heightened for nineteenth-century texts; our cultural consciousness is so permeated by nineteenth-century literature, including the numerous television, film and stage versions, that our reading of these texts will inevitably be mediated through this cultural consciousness. This is most evident in the marketing of books as “tie-ins” for film, television or stage adaptations, such as the recent Penguin edition of Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White* (2004) which uses the theatre poster for its front cover.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, for many readers nineteenth-century texts are framed by the twentieth-century adaptations of them.

The readings of nineteenth-century literature enacted by these texts are most apparent in their incorporation of Victorian texts into their narratives, a process I have designated ventriloquism. This process involves both “speaking like” and “speaking as” a Victorian; it can take the form of both impersonating a voice and “throwing” your voice so it appears to come from somewhere else. This process operates in various ways and so to comprehend its meaning and purpose I will

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<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the cover of the 2004 Penguin edition of Gaskell’s *North and South* is a picture of the actress who played Margaret Hale in the recent BBC adaptation.



distinguish between the different voices that are invoked and their interrelationships. As a novel which engages with postmodernism, it might be assumed that Byatt adopts the process of ventriloquism to highlight the predominance of Victorian stereotypes within our cultural consciousness, to suggest the impossibility, and even irrelevance, of distinguishing between the Victorians and contemporary reconstructions of them. Yet Byatt's texts are keen to establish the historical specificity of the Victorian era. Whilst addressing the stereotypical portrayals of the Victorians, Byatt also reveals the extent to which these portraits are reconstructions, seeking instead to provide a more complex and nuanced portrait of the Victorian era. Since neo-Victorian texts are committed to the historical specificity of the Victorian era it is necessary to maintain a distinction between Victorian and "pseudo-Victorian" texts and to consider the significance of incorporating historical literary texts into a fictional world.

Although the term "pseudo" is problematic in its connotations of "false" it is important to differentiate between texts that were written in the nineteenth century and texts written subsequently that adopt a nineteenth-century style.<sup>6</sup> It is important to distinguish between the use of "authentic" Victorian texts, mainly in 'The Conjugal Angel', and "pseudo-Victorian" texts, predominantly in *Possession*. There is also a need for further distinction since the category of pseudo-Victorian texts includes both texts that are purportedly written by historical Victorian figures and those attributed to fictional characters. Again, the commitment to historical specificity renders this an important distinction for the process of ventriloquism in these neo-Victorian texts. The distinction between historical and fictional figures,

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<sup>6</sup> An interesting illustration of the problems surrounding the classification of pseudo-Victorian texts is Anthony Thwaite's *Victorian Voices* (1980), a collection of poetry purporting to be spoken by minor figures from Victorian history, *Victorian Voices* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1980).

however, is self-consciously examined in these texts. My analysis of these texts will consider the purpose of incorporating historical figures and the effect of attributing “pseudo-Victorian” texts to them. This discussion will prompt an examination of neo-Victorian texts’ status as historical fictions.

Hilary Schor identifies Byatt’s mode of writing in *Angels and Insects* as “ghostwriting”, which she claims Byatt interprets in a ‘double sense’: ‘first, that of the “borrowings” (“writing like...”) that seem to approach the postmodern forms of pastiche, and second, a ghostwriting that is speaking with the dead, not so much as writers but as mouldering bodies, decaying forms’.<sup>7</sup> It is necessary to distinguish between the literal form of ghostwriting, which will be discussed in relation to spiritualism in Chapter 6, and the metaphorical sense of “writing like...” with which this chapter is concerned. To distinguish between the literal and metaphorical senses of ghostwriting in these texts I adopt the term “ventriloquism” to refer to the metaphorical process of ghostwriting analysed in this chapter.<sup>8</sup>

Schor’s category of “borrowings (writing like...)” needs to be refined to account for the particular forms this takes in neo-Victorian fiction. Schor’s identification of the process of “writing like” with postmodern pastiche is restrictive since this process is not limited to pastiche but can also be employed for parodic purposes. This association renders Schor’s analysis inadequate for neo-Victorian fiction since, as I will argue in the subsequent chapter, its concern with establishing a specific historical referent prevents it from being subsumed within the categories of

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<sup>7</sup> Hilary M. Schor, ‘Sorting, Morphing, and Mourning: A. S. Byatt Ghostwrites Victorian Fiction,’ *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century*, eds. John Kucich and Dianne F. Sadoff (Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 2000): 234-251, 237.

<sup>8</sup> Of course, the term ventriloquism retains an association with spiritualism since the role of the medium in a séance resembles that of a ventriloquist. Moreover, ventriloquism became, like spiritualism, a popular form of entertainment in the Victorian era. See Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford, New York: Oxford UP, 2000).

postmodernism. In describing this first sense of ghostwriting as ‘the “borrowings” (“writing like...”’) that seem to approach the postmodern forms of pastiche’ Schor conflates two distinct textual practices. The process of “writing like” essentially involves the imitation of the style of a previous author or literary form, in contrast to the technique of borrowings, which relates to the incorporation of another’s text into one’s own. As such, “borrowing” is more akin to the various forms of intertextuality, of which pastiche is merely one. Byatt herself seems to distinguish between these modes, primarily employing the mode of “writing like” in *Possession* and “borrowing” in ‘The Conjugal Angel’, a distinction that correlates to the differing status of the incorporated texts as “pseudo-Victorian” and Victorian respectively. As a consequence of the double relationship they construct with Victorian literature, all neo-Victorian texts are involved, at least to a certain extent, in this process of ventriloquism. Indeed, they all incorporate either Victorian or pseudo-Victorian texts into their narratives. Although I use ventriloquism to refer to both the process of borrowing and that of writing like, a distinction needs to be made concerning the status of the texts that are ventriloquized, whether the texts incorporated are actual Victorian texts or pseudo-Victorian texts. In order to elucidate these differences I will first consider how the borrowings from *In Memoriam* in ‘The Conjugal Angel’ can be conceived of in terms of ventriloquism. I will then consider the process of ventriloquism as manifested in the incorporation of pseudo-Victorian texts within *Possession*.

## **Borrowings**

The technique of incorporating “borrowings” into a text is a form of intertextuality, which designates the various relationships between texts, ranging

from explicit quotation to implicit allusion, from imitation to transformation. The term ‘inter-textuality’ was coined by Julia Kristeva to refer to the ‘transposition of one (or several) sign system(s) into another’.<sup>9</sup> The terms in which Kristeva conceives of intertextuality clearly signal her indebtedness to Bakhtin’s notion of dialogism: ‘The notion of *intertextuality* replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least *double*’.<sup>10</sup> Bakhtin’s theory of the novel posits its characteristic features as polyglossia, the interaction of languages, and heteroglossia, the internal differentiation of a language as a consequence of its various sociolects. Whilst Bakhtin’s theory provides a useful model for considering intertextuality and dialogism within the novel his definition needs to be extended to account for neo-Victorian fiction, which explicitly constructs a dialogue between two historical epochs and their literary traditions. Despite a mainly synchronic approach, Bakhtin does trace the historical emergence of dialogism through the development of the novel genre, distinguishing between what he terms two “stylistic lines of development”. In the first of these, which he traces back to the Sophistic novel:

Its primary characteristic is the fact that it knows only a single language and a single style [...]; heteroglossia remains *outside* the novel, although it does nevertheless have its effect on the novel as a dialogizing background in which the language and world of the novel is polemically and forensically implicated.<sup>11</sup>

Whilst a novel of this style may not overtly incorporate heteroglossia, its existence within the world of language and literature means it will be comprehended and

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<sup>9</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (1974, New York: Columbia UP, 1984) 59-60.

<sup>10</sup> Julia Kristeva, ‘Word, Dialogue and Novel,’ *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine & Leon S. Roudiez, ed. Leon S Roudiez, (1977; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984) 64-91, 66.

<sup>11</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: U of Texas P, 1992) 375.



evaluated in relation to other languages.

In contrast, the second line of development ‘incorporates heteroglossia into a novel’s composition, exploiting it to orchestrate its own meaning and frequently resisting altogether any unmediated and pure authorial discourse’.<sup>12</sup> With their inserted genres and incorporation of literary texts, the neo-Victorian texts I am dealing with mainly belong to this second line of development. Yet they also represent the first stylistic mode as the forms of Victorian fiction provide the ‘dialogizing background’ of these texts. Thus as the subsequent discussion will reveal, even the instances of ‘unmediated and pure authorial discourse’ in these texts engage with the modes of narration in Victorian realist novels. This interaction between Victorian and contemporary forms reveals the limitations of Bakhtinian theory for neo-Victorian fiction. Despite tracing the historical development of the novel, Bakhtin’s notion of dialogism is primarily examined in its synchronic aspect, the heteroglossia of languages incorporated into a text exist contemporaneously with each other. Thus, Bakhtin’s theory does not fully explore the diachronic aspect of dialogism, as enacted in the dialogue neo-Victorian texts establish with their nineteenth-century predecessors.

Although the term ventriloquism would seem to refer only to the incorporation of texts written in the style of Victorian texts I am also using it to refer to the process of incorporating actual Victorian texts into neo-Victorian novels. The quotation of a text within a different context always transforms the original text and thus the version presented within the neo-Victorian novel is never merely a direct transcript of the “original”. The function these incorporated texts serve is one of the

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<sup>12</sup> Bakhtin, 375.

main ways in which they are transformed, as is the presentation of only selected extracts from the original. Whilst *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and 'The Conjugal Angel' both incorporate "actual" Victorian texts the function of these texts differ. In Fowles's novel extracts from Victorian poetry and prose sources are employed as chapter epigraphs, they provide the historical frame for the narrative.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, Byatt's novella incorporates extracts from Tennyson's *In Memoriam* into the narrative itself. Although the mode and purpose of incorporation differs, the texts incorporated share a similar status. The incorporation of actual Victorian texts within neo-Victorian fictions replicates at a narrative level these texts' engagement with Victorian fiction. The Victorian texts are never simply transposed into the neo-Victorian texts but rather are transformed by their new context. Thus, neo-Victorian fiction exists in a dialogic relationship to Victorian fiction.

'The Conjugal Angel' establishes a dialogue with Tennyson's *In Memoriam* through its incorporation of numerous lyrics from the poem. As such, Byatt is involved not in a process of "writing like..." but rather intertextual "borrowings" from an actual Victorian text. Yet the incorporation of Tennyson's *In Memoriam* is not unproblematic in relation to the issue of ventriloquism. Through its incorporation within a fictional text, the status of *In Memoriam* as an "actual" rather than "pseudo" Victorian text is brought into question. The process of selection and the context in which the extracts from Tennyson's poem are reproduced distinguishes the *In Memoriam* of Byatt's novella from the canonised version. In this sense, Byatt questions the notion of an "original" text by highlighting that the cultural knowledge of *In Memoriam* is derived from partial readings of the text, such as are commonly

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<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of epigraphs in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* see Deborah Bowen, 'The Riddler Riddled: Reading the Epigraphs in John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*,' *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 25 (1995): 67-90.

provided in anthologies. Thus, the existence of an “authentic” original text, with which the poem in ‘The Conjugal Angel’ can be compared, is challenged. One reviewer, Kathryn Hughes, considers the incorporation of the extracts from *In Memoriam* as contributing to the novella’s treatment of the relationship between Alfred Tennyson and Arthur Hallam. She argues that ‘The Conjugal Angel’ is ‘an attempt to sort out [...] whether Tennyson and his friend Arthur Hallam were actually at it’, which she says is assisted by Byatt’s incorporation of ‘the relevant ambiguous stanzas from “In Memoriam”’.<sup>14</sup> Hughes’s account depends upon a reductive reading of both *In Memoriam* and ‘The Conjugal Angel’, foregrounding the sexual aspects of both texts. Moreover, whilst Hughes’s interpretation is permitted by some of the extracts from *In Memoriam* in the novella, her account does not apply to all the lyrics incorporated into ‘The Conjugal Angel’; her interpretation is a selective reconstruction of the incorporated lyrics to coincide with her pre-determined interpretation of both *In Memoriam* and ‘The Conjugal Angel’. Another interpretation of the “borrowed” lyrics might understand them in terms of the novella’s engagement with spiritualism; both the lyrics and the novella are concerned with the after-life, both Hallam’s and those left behind. The poem’s contribution to the spiritualist aspect of the novella is explicitly foregrounded in the observation that ‘The spirits often speak to us through that poem, it seems to be a particular favourite with them [...]’ (‘CA’, 204). The spirits’ use of *In Memoriam* reveals an affinity with Byatt’s own process; ‘The Conjugal Angel’ is explicitly concerned with literature’s power to resurrect the voices of the past.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Kathryn Hughes, ‘Repossession,’ rev. of *Angels and Insects*, by A. S. Byatt, *New Statesman* 6 Nov 1992: 49.

<sup>15</sup> The process of resurrection in this text will be considered in Chapter 6.

Tennyson's poem itself raises problems of originality and authorship because of its mode of composition, it was written over a period of 17 years as separate lyric stanzas that were eventually combined to form a continuous poem. Thus, there are persistent attempts to reconstruct the poem according to the "original" order of the lyrics, the order of composition.<sup>16</sup> The circumstances which prompted the writing of *In Memoriam*, the death of Tennyson's friend Arthur Hallam, suggests a further interesting way in which Tennyson's poem can be read as engaging in a process of ventriloquism, an approach that is highlighted in 'The Conjugal Angel'. The fictional Tennyson conceives of *In Memoriam* as in a sense 'Arthur's poems' ('CA', 263) and, indeed, it was initially published anonymously with the heading '**IN MEMORIAM A. H. H. OBIIT MDCCCXXXIII**'.<sup>17</sup> Thus, Arthur not only prompted the poem but on the original title page he occupied the position normally reserved for the author. Moreover, it can be argued that Tennyson's sister, Emily Jesse, is the originator of the poem since it ventriloquizes her grief. Initially, Alfred merely aligns himself with Emily:

O what to her shall be the end?  
                     And what to me remains of good?  
                     To her, perpetual maidenhood,  
                     And unto me no second friend (6 l.41-44; 'CA', 234).

Yet as the poem progresses Alfred's grief displaces Emily's and he usurps her position as Arthur's widow:

Two partners of a married life –  
                     I look'd on these and thought of thee

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<sup>16</sup> See 'Introduction', Alfred Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, eds. Susan Shatto and Marion Shaw (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982) 1-33.

<sup>17</sup> Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, eds. Shatto and Shaw 39; all subsequent references will appear parenthetically. According to Edgar Shannon, despite the omission of the author's name on the title page, 'There was little doubt, however, as to the identity of the pen from which the unusual work emanated,' *Tennyson and The Reviewers: A Study of His Literary Reputation and of the Influence of the Critics upon His Poetry 1827 – 1851* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1952) 141.

In vastness and in mystery,  
And of my spirit as of a wife' (97, l. 5-8; 'CA', 234).

It is not only Emily's grief that is appropriated in the poem but also the figure of Emily herself, as the fictional Emily recognises, 'Her small ghost appeared from time to time in the poem' ('CA', 233). Reflecting on her incorporation in the poem the fictional Emily observes that 'The ringlets and the rose were hers, though Alfred had made the meek dove's hair golden, not raven' ('CA', 234). Furthermore, by omitting the troublesome matter of Emily's subsequent marriage to Captain Jesse and replacing it with the marriage of another sister, Tennyson's poem denies Emily a life after Arthur, trapping her in the role of grieving widow. The séances in 'The Conjugal Angel' provide Emily Jesse with a voice to repudiate this role. Byatt portrays Emily as haunted by the memory of her dead fiancé and the life they would have shared; she believes that '[...] these unborn children [of her and Arthur], with terrible energy, haunted her and her own two sons, named as they were for the dead [...]' ('CA', 235). When in the second séance Arthur's ghost, speaking through Sophy, tells Emily "'I triumph in conclusive bliss. [...] we] shall be joined, and made one Angel'", Emily surprises everyone present, including her husband, by retorting '[...] I consider that an extremely unfair arrangement, and shall have nothing to do with it' ('CA', 283). Thus, the séance, and the novella in which it occurs, provide Emily with the opportunity to confront the ghost of Hallam and to oppose the appropriation of her desires by the male figures in her life, especially by Hallam and Tennyson.

Although there is a need to distinguish between Tennyson's *In Memoriam* and the text as it appears in 'The Conjugal Angel' there is clearly still a connection between the two poems that affects the reading of Byatt's novella. In *Possession*, the



situation is different. Unlike Tennyson's poem, which had, and continues to have, an existence external to the fictional world of Byatt's novella, the majority of the Victorian poems in *Possession* do not. Interestingly, whilst Byatt provides reference details for the pseudo-Victorian texts, these details are omitted for the Victorian poem *In Memoriam*. This could be seen as an attempt to lend an aura of "authenticity" to the pseudo-Victorian texts of *Possession*. It could also be a consequence of the postmodern context of the novel, indicating that pseudo-Victorian texts are as "historical" as actual Victorian texts, and that actual Victorian texts are no less "fictional" than pseudo-Victorian ones. Yet Byatt's texts distance themselves from the postmodern designation of all history as fictional and reassert the specificity of the historical referents they portray. In this light, the absence of reference details in 'The Conjugal Angel' reveals an assumption of the reader's familiarity with the poem as *In Memoriam* has become part of the cultural capital of Victorian history and literature. As this issue of references reveals, a simplistic opposition between real and pseudo-Victorian texts is problematic. Indeed, since the publication of *Possession* some of the pseudo-Victorian poetry of Christabel LaMotte has acquired an external existence with "manuscripts" of fragments appearing in *Victorian Poetry*.<sup>18</sup> Not only the Victorian poetry but also the Victorian poets in *Possession* are pseudo-Victorian. Unlike in 'The Conjugal Angel', Byatt does not fictionalise a known figure from Victorian history but rather creates her own Victorian poets. Whilst these pseudo-Victorian poems do not directly resurrect Victorian poets they are ventriloquisms as they are modelled on nineteenth-century

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<sup>18</sup> *Victorian Poetry* 33 (1995): 3. The fragments are prefaced by a letter purportedly from Maud Michell-Bailey, in which she refers to her author A.S. Byatt, and so further blurs the boundary between historical and fictional figures. Maud Michell-Bailey, Letter, *Victorian Poetry* 33 (1995): 1-2.

poetry. The use of historical figures as models for fictional characters raises the problematic issue of the relationship between historical and fictional figures with which neo-Victorian fiction explicitly engages. This issue will be considered in relation to neo-Victorian fictions' status as historical texts subsequently. First, however, I want to examine the pseudo-Victorian texts in *Possession*.

### **"Writing Like...."**

In adopting the term ventriloquism to designate the process of "writing like", I am explicitly rejecting the categories of parody or pastiche to account for this process. As I remarked in my discussion of Schor, the association of pastiche with postmodern forms of literature renders it inadequate for neo-Victorian fiction, which should be distinguished from postmodern forms. Moreover, the modes of parody and pastiche both convey value judgements which do not correspond to those of the neo-Victorian authors involved in the processes of ventriloquism.<sup>19</sup>

The definition of parody, and in particular its relation to pastiche, has long been a contentious issue in literary criticism, the history of which Simon Dentith traces in his book *Parody* (2000). Dentith defines parody as 'any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice.'<sup>20</sup> Dentith unpacks this definition explaining that "polemical" is used 'to allude to the contentious or "attacking" mode in which parody can be written, though it is "relatively" polemical because the ferocity of the attack can vary widely between different forms of parody.'<sup>21</sup> Thus parody is seen to have a critical

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<sup>19</sup> Although not explicitly discussing her own work, Byatt also dismisses the 'loaded moral implications of "parody", or "pastiche"' in favour of ventriloquism. A. S. Byatt, *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2000) 43.

<sup>20</sup> Simon Dentith, *Parody* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000) 9.

<sup>21</sup> Dentith, 9.

function which involves a value judgment of the text being alluded to. It is this critical function that distinguishes parody from pastiche: 'It is in painting that [pastiche] began to take on the meaning of imitation of another style without critical distance, and it is this meaning that has come to dominate in contemporary usage of the term.'<sup>22</sup> Any discussion of pastiche in relation to texts produced in the postmodern age must take into account Jameson's use of the term, which is related to his wider critique of the 'historical deafness' of postmodernism.<sup>23</sup> For Jameson, postmodernist culture, which is intimately related to the economic forms of late capitalism, is characterised by pastiche, which he sees as 'blank parody':

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, pastiche is parody dislocated from any political or satirical intent, leaving only a 'linguistic mask' that is divorced from its historical referent. This assessment fails to account for the process of ventriloquism within neo-Victorian fiction since these texts do not merely evoke the style of the past but rather are concerned with recreating the historical specificity of the Victorian era. Indeed, in adopting the process of ventriloquism *Possession* engages with the specifically Victorian forms of ventriloquism as practiced by Browning.

The title of Ann Hulbert's essay, 'The Great Ventriloquist', suggests that she

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<sup>22</sup> Dentith, 194.

<sup>23</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1993) xi. See the discussion of "historical deafness" in Chapter 2.

<sup>24</sup> Jameson, 17.

is more aware than most critics of the nuances I am trying to establish.<sup>25</sup> Yet her use of the term “ventriloquist” is merely a pun on the title of Mortimer Cropper’s biography of Ash rather than a rigorously applied critical concept. In fact, Hulbert evaluates Byatt’s text as a ‘skilful parody’, a term she uses in relation to both the twentieth-century texts, specifically those of Cropper and Stern, and the nineteenth-century texts in the novel.<sup>26</sup> Whilst I favour the term ventriloquism for Byatt’s incorporation of pseudo-Victorian texts, the incorporation of pseudo-twentieth-century texts is more akin to the mode of parody. Yet Hulbert fails to differentiate between Byatt’s parody of these twentieth-century genres and her presentation of nineteenth-century ones, referring to Byatt’s ‘parodic skills’ in creating the latter.<sup>27</sup> Byatt herself distances *Possession* from parody claiming that her intention was ‘to do with rescuing the complicated Victorian thinkers from modern diminishing parodies like those of Fowles’.<sup>28</sup> Hulbert’s discussion of *Possession*’s parody of twentieth-century texts foregrounds an important aspect that is often neglected in reviews, which prefer to dwell on the nineteenth-century poets and their texts. Although I am primarily interested in the ventriloquism of nineteenth-century texts a brief consideration of Byatt’s treatment of twentieth-century texts will illuminate her attitude towards the nineteenth-century texts.

The twentieth-century texts incorporated into *Possession* are not as prolific as those produced by the nineteenth-century characters. Moreover, in stark contrast to the abundance of texts produced by Ash and LaMotte, the twentieth-century

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<sup>25</sup> Ann Hulbert, ‘The Great Ventriloquist: A. S. Byatt’s *Possession: A Romance*,’ *Contemporary British Women Writers: Texts and Strategies*, ed. Robert E. Hosmer Jr. (London: Macmillan, 1993) 55–64.

<sup>26</sup> Hulbert, 58, 59.

<sup>27</sup> Hulbert, 59.

<sup>28</sup> Byatt, *On Histories*, 79.

protagonists Roland and Maud are wholly unrepresented by texts. This discrepancy between the textual productions of the two centuries can be interpreted as a comment on the state of literature in the latter century, an enactment of the postmodern dictum that literary originality has been exhausted.<sup>29</sup> Both Roland and Blackadder are aspiring poets whose literary ambitions are deterred by the awesome shadow cast by their predecessors, in particular Ash. In Blackadder's case this deterrence comes indirectly, through the figure of F. R. Leavis:

Leavis did to Blackadder what he did to serious students; he showed him the terrible, the magnificent importance and urgency of English literature and simultaneously deprived him of any confidence in his own capacity to contribute to or change it. The young Blackadder wrote poems, imagined Dr Leavis's comments on them, and burned them (*P*, 27).

Similarly, Roland's poetic ambitions only emerge after he frees himself from Ash's narrative, after his and Maud's secret has been discovered by the other scholars and so taken out of their hands. 'He was writing lists of words. He was writing lists of words that resisted arrangement into the sentences of literary criticism or theory' (*P*, 431). Clearly, it is not just the weight of literary heritage which prevents Roland from writing poetry but also the intellectual climate produced by literary criticism and theory. This observation hints at the reason for the sparseness of twentieth-century texts in comparison to the plethora of nineteenth-century texts. All the twentieth-century characters whose texts are incorporated into the novel are literary critics, biographers, or theorists and as such their contact with literature occurs at a distance in contrast to the poets and diarists; whilst the nineteenth-century figures are all writers, the twentieth-century characters are readers. Indeed, Byatt's

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<sup>29</sup> See, for instance, John Barth's essay 'The Literature of Exhaustion' in *The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1997) 70-83.



own justification for her use of ventriloquism suggests the desire to differentiate between literature and literary criticism: 'ventriloquism became necessary because of what I felt was the increasing gulf between current literary criticism and the words of the literary texts it in some sense discusses'.<sup>30</sup> This relationship between literary and critical texts is explicitly addressed through the incorporation of contemporary criticisms of the Victorian poems, best illustrated in the feminist criticism of Christabel LaMotte's poetry. Byatt parodies the type of feminist criticism influenced by French theories, especially those of Lacan, Kristeva and Cixous, which she perceives as obsessed with sexuality and provides an example of this in the extract from Leonora Stern's book *Motif and Matrix in the Poems of LaMotte* (P, 244-246). The absurdity of such an approach in which everything is reduced to sexuality is highlighted by Leonora's extension of this principle into her personal life (P, 270). The reductive and mechanistic nature of this form of criticism is under attack here, the type of criticism which decides in advance what it is looking for and then, unsurprisingly, uncovers it in the text under consideration.<sup>31</sup>

In undertaking the process of ventriloquism to such a prolific extent in *Possession* Byatt attempts to provide the reader with direct access to the literature of the nineteenth century. Such a desire can also account for Byatt's decision to invent her own Victorian poets and their texts rather than using actual Victorian texts. As the discussion of *In Memoriam* revealed, Victorian literature has become part of the cultural capital we possess about the nineteenth century so it would be difficult for

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<sup>30</sup> Byatt, *On Histories*, 45.

<sup>31</sup> This negative evaluation of critical theory's relationship to literature is explored in the opening scenes of *The Biographer's Tale*; recalling a postgraduate seminar on Lacan's theory of *morcellement*, Phineas confesses 'I can't remember what text we were supposed to be studying' (BT, 1). In this novel, critical theory is portrayed as repetitive and formulaic and theory's approach to literary texts is aptly indicated by the lecturer's name; Gareth Butcher.

readers to approach a Victorian text in isolation from their critical and cultural knowledge of it. As I will show, however, such a project is ultimately impossible to achieve as even the texts produced by Byatt's pseudo-Victorian poets are surrounded by contemporary critical apparatus. The process of ventriloquism operates on various levels in *Possession*: Byatt ventriloquizes Victorian poets and poems in her creation of Ash and LaMotte; Ash is himself a ventriloquist through his poetic mode of dramatic monologues; and the two poets ventriloquize each other.

Ash's preferred poetic form is the dramatic monologue, in which the voices of past ages and cultures are ventriloquized by the poet. For instance, a description of some of the poems in Ash's collection *Gods, Men and Heroes* refers to "The Solitary Thoughts of Alexander Selkirk" [which presents] the musings of the castaway sailor on his island [...] "The Tinker's Grace", purporting to be Bunyan's prison musings on Divine Grace, and [...] Pedro of Portugal's rapt and bizarre declaration of love, in 1356, for the embalmed corpse of his murdered wife, Iñez de Castro [...] (P, 7). During the course of the novel Ash's impressive range of personas becomes even more apparent through the incorporation of extracts from several of his poems. 'Swammerdam' tells the story of the seventeenth-century Dutch scientist (P, 202 – 209); 'Ragnarök', that of the figure from Norse mythology (P, 239-242) whilst *Mummy Possesst* adopts the persona of a medium (P, 405-412). As this list shows, Ash adopts a variety of personas in his poems, each with their own distinctive language, thus his poetic oeuvre explicitly engages in the processes of ventriloquism.

Each individual poem is also an act of ventriloquism as Ash adopts a persona in favour of his own poetic voice. In critical terms "persona" distinguishes the

speaker of a literary work from the author, it is often seen in terms of a mask. Ash explicitly denies this association of the persona as a mask, ‘*my persona, [...] are not [...] my masks*’ (*P*, 6), implying that reading personas as merely masks through which the author expresses their own ideas is too simplistic an approach, and that, rather, the poet and the persona need to be conceived of as distinct entities. This dissociation of poet and persona is a consequence of Ash’s chosen poetic form, the dramatic monologue. Alan Sinfield’s observations on the dramatic monologue complicate this approach, ‘What we experience in dramatic monologue [...] is a divided consciousness [...] we are obliged to posit simultaneously the speaking “I” and the poet’s “I”.’<sup>32</sup> Whilst it is necessary to maintain this distinction between the persona and the author of a dramatic monologue, the notion of persona is also useful in considering the position of the speaker in a dramatic monologue, and reveals another way in which the genre is engaged in the process of ventriloquism. Dramatic monologues, as perfected by Robert Browning, present a speaker who is himself adopting a mask or persona, the image they intend to present to the reader is undercut by the image they unwittingly reveal. Perhaps the most famous example of this technique of unintentional disclosure is Browning’s ‘My Last Duchess’, in which the speaker inadvertently admits that he murdered his lover. Although not incorporated into Byatt’s novel, the description of Ash’s ‘Pedro of Portugal’ implicitly associates it with Browning’s poem. The omission of the agent who murdered Pedro’s wife in this description allows for the possibility that it was the speaker himself. As the connection between these two poems shows, Ash’s poetic voice is itself a ventriloquism, by Byatt, of the poetic voice of Browning. Thus, these neo-Victorian

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<sup>32</sup> Alan Sinfield, *Dramatic Monologue* (London: Methuen, 1977) 32.

texts reveal that the supposedly postmodern feature of ventriloquism has its roots in Victorian literary practices.<sup>33</sup>

Whilst numerous critics have identified the resemblance between Browning and Ash few have gone so far as to identify the sources of Ash's poems in Browning's own work.<sup>34</sup> Ash's use of the dramatic monologue can be seen as a ventriloquism of the form perfected by Browning and indeed the majority of Ash's poems have intertextual links to Browning's poems, the descriptions of Ash's poems (in the *Gods, Men and Heroes* extract cited above) clearly indicate their intertextual relationships with Browning's poems. For instance, Ash's naturalist poem 'Swammerdam' echoes Browning's 'An Epistle Containing the Strange Medical Experience of Karshish, the Arab Physician' since the protagonists share an interest in collecting specimens of the natural world. Moreover, 'Karshish' could also be a source for Ash's 'Lazarus' as Karshish hears and assesses the story of Lazarus.

The intertextual connections between Browning's poetry and Ash's are highlighted by the inclusion of an extract from Browning's 'Mr Sludge, the Medium' as an epigraph to the novel.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, Ash's *Mummy Possest* can be seen as a ventriloquism of Browning's dramatic monologue, although there is an important difference between Ash's and Browning's poem.

Browning's poem constructs an opposition between the speaker, a medium, and a sceptical observer, who has caught the medium practising a deception. Ash's

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<sup>33</sup> On ventriloquism as a postmodernist technique, see Hulbert, 56.

<sup>34</sup> See for instance Louise Yelin, 'Cultural Cartography: A. S. Byatt's *Possession* and the Politics of Victorian Studies,' *Victorian Newsletter* 81 (1992): 38-41, 38; and Jay Parini, 'Unearthing the Secret Lover,' *New York Times* 21 Oct 1990: 11. Kathleen Coyne Kelly comes closest in describing Ash's poetry as 'Browningesque' and identifying 'Mummy Possest' as a 'reply' to Browning's 'Mr Sludge'; although she fails to explain how Ash's poem "replies" to Browning's. *A. S. Byatt*, (London: Prentice Hall, 1996) 92.

<sup>35</sup> 'Mr Sludge, the Medium,' Robert Browning, *Dramatic Monologues*. Selected and Introduced by A. S. Byatt, Illustrated by Richard Shirley Smith. (London: The Folio Society, 1991) 206-52. All subsequent line references will appear parenthetically in the text.

poem also adopts a medium as the speaker and although the addressee is an apprentice rather than an observer they adopt a similar stance towards the medium's deceptions as that of Browning's addressee. Moreover, the medium in Ash's poem employs a similar justification to Mr. Sludge. Mr. Sludge aligns his trickery with art claiming it is 'Really mere novel writing of a sort, / Acting, or improvising, make-believe, / Surely not downright cheating' (l.427-429). This connection between literature and spiritualism is explicitly highlighted in the extract from 'Mr Sludge' used as a preface to *Possession*. The speaker of *Mummy Possesst* similarly justifies her use of tricks saying 'You call these spirit *mises en scène* a lie. / I call it artfulness, or simply Art' (*P*, 408-9; l.151-152), which is then extended to the claim that 'A Tale, a Story, that may hide a Truth' (*P*, 409; l.153). Again this echoes Mr Sludge's declaration that 'I'm ready to believe my very self - / that every cheat's inspired, and every lie / Quick with a germ of truth' (l.1323-1325). Ash's poem diverges from its model, however, in the reversal of the gender-coding of Browning's poem. In 'Mr Sludge' the medium is a male, clearly based on the historical figure D. D. Home who was renowned as a medium in both America and Britain during the mid- to late-nineteenth century. In contrast, Ash's poem depicts a female medium, reflecting not only his particular experience of spiritualism through Mrs Less' séances but also the widespread involvement of women within the spiritualist movement of the nineteenth century.<sup>36</sup> In reversing the gender-coding of Browning's text Byatt addresses the historical situation of Victorian spiritualism as many women were involved through their position as mediums, indeed women were thought to be

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<sup>36</sup> The issues of gender in relation to spiritualism will be considered in more detail in Chapter 6.



particularly suited to the role of the passive medium.<sup>37</sup> The re-writing of Browning's Victorian text correlates to the re-writing of *In Memoriam* undertaken throughout 'The Conjugal Angel' and both instances have implications for the interrogation of the canon of Victorian literature within these texts. Tennyson and Robert Browning have come to occupy a prominent place in the canons of Victorian poetry, perhaps at the expense of many other Victorian poets, especially women. For instance in 1850 Elizabeth Barrett Browning was more famous than her husband, Robert Browning. Indeed, she was considered as a possible successor to Wordsworth for the Poet Laureatship, a position for which Robert, 'whose poems had at no time approached Elizabeth's in popularity, was never a serious contender.'<sup>38</sup>

Byatt similarly ventriloquizes nineteenth-century poets in the figure of Christabel LaMotte. Most reviewers concur that LaMotte is based on Christina Rossetti and Emily Dickinson<sup>39</sup>, although Kelly proposes a more composite portrait including elements of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot and the Brontë sisters.<sup>40</sup> As with Ash, the majority of reviewers merely list those poets LaMotte resembles rather than analysing the relationships in poetic style. The connections between LaMotte's poetry and that of Christina Rossetti and Emily Dickinson are self-consciously highlighted by the incorporation of critical responses to LaMotte's work. The following list of titles demonstrates the thematic concerns feminist critics identified in LaMotte's work:

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<sup>37</sup> See Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Nineteenth Century England* (London: Virago, 1989).

<sup>38</sup> Boyd Litzinger and Donald Smalley, eds., 'Introduction', *Browning: the Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1970) 12.

<sup>39</sup> See Parini, 11; Yelin, 38; and Catherine Burgass, *A. S. Byatt's Possession: A Reader's Guide* (London: Continuum, 2002) 52.

<sup>40</sup> Kelly, 80.

They wrote on 'Ariachne's Broken Woof: Art as Discarded Spinning in the Poems of LaMotte.' Or 'Melusina and the Daemonic Double: Good Mother, Bad Serpent.' 'A Docile Rage: Christabel LaMotte's Ambivalent Domesticity.' 'White Gloves: Blanche Glover: occluded Lesbian sexuality in LaMotte.' There was an essay by Maud Bailey herself on 'Melusina, Builder of Cities: a Subversive Female Cosmogony.' (P, 37-38).

The foregrounding of issues of domesticity and the position of the female artist in these titles recalls feminist responses to Victorian women's poetry. This list of criticism prefigures most of the LaMotte poems and tales incorporated into *Possession* and so clearly provides the reader with a model through which to interpret them. This is especially apparent in relation to 'Ariachne's Broken Woof', which Roland subsequently reads. Although the text of this essay is not included the reader is told that it 'elegantly dissected one of Christabel's insect poems' (P, 38). This is followed by some lines of poetry, presumably belonging to the aforementioned insect poem, which are evidently meant to be read as a metaphor for the position of the female artist in Victorian society. Several of LaMotte's poems dramatise the feelings of confinement feminist scholars attribute to Victorian women's poetry. In the poem referred to above, the insect is described as 'so blotched and cramped a creature' and is implicitly associated with women's confinement in the private sphere through terms, such as 'threading', connected with the feminine activity of sewing (P, 38). Additionally, LaMotte's poem of the Cumaean Sibyl (P, 54) is explicitly about confinement in its adoption of the myth of the Sibyl in a jar, whilst another of her poems poses the possibility of an escape: 'And windows fly from silent rooms / And walls break outwards – with a rush –' (P, 210). These poems seem to confirm Maud Bailey's interpretation of 'Victorian women's imagination of space' (P, 54). Maud's essay is:



About agoraphobia and claustrophobia and the paradoxical desire to be let out into unconfined space, the wild moorland, the open ground, and at the same time to be closed into tighter and tighter impenetrable small spaces – like Emily Dickinson’s voluntary confinement, like the Sibyl’s jar (*P*, 54).

In this reading, Maud not only explicitly connects the Sibyl poem with the theme of confinement but also associates LaMotte’s imaginative use of the theme with Emily Dickinson. The feminist interpretations of LaMotte’s poetry are confirmed by the poems subsequently presented to the reader. This presentation of LaMotte’s poetry through the mediating lens of contemporary criticism is especially prominent in relation to ‘The Fairy Melusine’. Interestingly, Byatt claims that LaMotte’s ‘Melusine’ was ‘written to conform with a feminist interpretation of the imaginary poem – an interpretation I had in fact written before writing the text itself’.<sup>41</sup> Thus, ‘Melusine’ is in fact a ventriloquism of the type of feminist criticism exemplified by Leonora Stern and Maud Bailey in *Possession*. Although this would appear to denigrate the LaMotte poem it actually serves as a comment on the reductive nature of contemporary critical theory, which approaches a text with a predetermined theory and proceeds to make the text “fit” that theory. In making LaMotte’s poetry fit with critical readings Byatt reverses the usual practice of criticism, which exists in a vampiric relationship to the poetic texts they purport to explain, sucking the life and energy out of them and reducing their complexities to a single preoccupation.

Although LaMotte’s poetry clearly shares the pre-occupations of Christina Rossetti’s and Emily Dickinson’s poetry, the relationship between the fictional and historical poets is not as explicit as the dialogue Byatt constructs between Ash’s *Mummy Possesst* and Browning’s ‘Mr. Sludge’. Despite this, there are some

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<sup>41</sup> Byatt, *On Histories*, 47.

connections between LaMotte's and Rossetti's poems which can be illuminating.<sup>42</sup>

LaMotte's poem on the drowned city of Is (*P*, 330-331) can be seen to echo Rossetti's 'In the Round Tower at Jhansi, June 8, 1857'. In both poems the male figures encounter death in the arms of their lover. Similarly, LaMotte's poem about Dolly can be read in conjunction with Rossetti's 'Winter: My Secret', in which Rossetti 'uses a coy playfulness and sardonic wit to reduce the self but at the same time to preserve for it a secret inner space'.<sup>43</sup> LaMotte's poem creates a similar secret space through the speaker's adoption of Dolly as a confidante. In the Rossetti poem the speaker teases the reader by continually promising and then refusing to reveal the secret. The poem closes with yet another deferral of the revelation: 'Perhaps my secret I may say, / Or you may guess' (l.33-34). LaMotte's poem replicates but reverses the paradoxical nature of Rossetti's. Despite declaring that Dolly's '[...] wax lips are sealed' (*P*, 82), the poem actually discloses the secret by providing Maud with the clue to the hiding-place of Ash and LaMotte's love letters. This simultaneous denial and fulfilment of disclosure is replicated in the novel's portrayal of Christabel herself. The situation reverses that of the Dolly poem as the narrative ostensibly reveals but actually conceals Christabel's secrets. The revelation of Christabel's secret relationship with Ash distracts the reader's attention from the fact that the nature of her relationship with Blanche is never disclosed.<sup>44</sup>

In addition to ventriloquising actual Victorian poets, the biographical reading provided by Roland and Maud, and encouraged by Byatt, reveals the extent to which

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<sup>42</sup> The Christina Rossetti poems used in this section are taken from Daniel Karlin, ed., *The Penguin Book of Victorian Verse* (London: Penguin Books, 1998). All subsequent line references will appear parenthetically in the text.

<sup>43</sup> 'Christina Rossetti, 1830-94,' *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. M. H. Abrams, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. Vol. 2, (London: Norton, 2000) 1583-84, 1584.

<sup>44</sup> See Richard Jenkyns, 'Disinterring buried lives,' *TLS* 2-8 March 1990: 213-214, 213.

these pseudo-Victorian poets ventriloquize each other. The numerous puns on “Ash” in Randolph’s poetry are seen by the twentieth-century critics as a means by which the poet wrote himself into his poetry. Following the discovery of the relationship between Ash and LaMotte, the poets’ works are re-read in light of each other’s imagery; consequently any reference to “ash” in LaMotte’s poetry has to be re-interpreted. This relates back to the Bakhtinian theory of dialogism in which he argues that individual words retain the significance of a previous speaker’s use of them.<sup>45</sup> Aside from incorporating such references to her lover, there is also an intertextual echo in the poetic images of Ash and LaMotte which is explicitly revealed to the reader through the mediating comprehension of Maud and Roland.

Roland recites a passage from Ash’s *Ask to Embla* to Maud:

We drank deep of the Fountain of Vaocluse  
And where the northern Force incessantly  
Stirs the still pool, were stirred. And shall those founts  
Which freely flowed to meet our thirsts, be sealed? (*P*, 237).

This has a direct correlation in LaMotte’s *Melusina*, which Maud recites back to Roland as a kind of echo:

Ah, Melusine, I have betrayed your faith  
Is there no remedy? Must we two part?  
Shall our hearth’s ash grow pale, and shall those founts  
Which freely flowed to meet our thirsts, be sealed? (*P*, 237).

As well as the direct echo in the final lines of each of these stanzas, LaMotte’s line ‘Shall our hearth’s ash grow pale’ can be reinterpreted in light of her relationship with Ash. Maud’s traditional interpretation of this symbolism presupposes that ‘the hearth is the home’ (*P*, 237), but it is complicated by Maud and Roland’s discovery since ‘ash’ could be interpreted as a reference to Randolph Henry Ash. In this light, LaMotte’s stanza could be referring to the termination of her

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<sup>45</sup> Bakhtin, 280.



relationship with Ash. Whilst Byatt uses the twentieth-century critics to highlight the connections between Ash and LaMotte's poetry she also allows the reader to adopt this role of literary detective for themselves. By the time LaMotte's 'The Fairy Melusine' is presented in its entirety the reader has gained an increased awareness, extending beyond that of the twentieth-century characters, of Ash and LaMotte's relationship. Thus the reader approaches *Melusina* with a heightened sense of the significance of its poetic images and is therefore perhaps more attuned to notice them.<sup>46</sup> Roland says of 'Melusine' that it is almost as if Ash wrote it: '[...] I feel *Melusina* is very like some of Ash's poems – The rest of her work isn't at all. But *Melusina* sounds often as though he wrote it. To me. Not the subject matter. The style' (*P*, 264-65). This comment raises the problematic issue of originality and authorship in relation to these poets, who so clearly influence each other, an issue which in this instance is overlaid with important questions of gender politics in literature. Maud's reply to Roland's observation, 'I don't want to think that. But I do see what you mean' (*P*, 265), betrays the problems that issues of influence and intertextuality raise for feminist scholars seeking to assert the primacy and importance of "recovered" female authors. These questions also have implications for the status and valuation of neo-Victorian fiction since it raises the issue of whether these texts, which so clearly draw on Victorian forebears, can be considered as truly original. This issue will be returned to at the end of the chapter.

The question of originality also raises the notion of authorship which is interrogated through the relationship between the pseudo-Victorian poets and their historical counterparts. Barthes's notorious declaration of the death of the author and

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<sup>46</sup> This applies to all the Ash and LaMotte works incorporated into *Possession*: for instance, a sensitive reader may detect an allusion to LaMotte's 'Is' poem in the reference to a 'drowned city' in Ash's *Mummy Possest* (l. 36-37).

the connected privileging of the reader in reader-response theory is problematised in these texts.<sup>47</sup> In both 'The Conjugal Angel' and *Possession* Byatt resurrects not only the voices of the past but also Victorian poets themselves. Authors are resurrected as characters in these texts, directly in the case of Tennyson and indirectly in Ash and LaMotte's resemblances to Browning and Rossetti. The resurrection of the physical presence of these authors appears to undermine the post-structuralist claim that the author is a purely textual construct.<sup>48</sup> Yet in 'The Conjugal Angel', *In Memoriam* attains an existence almost entirely divorced from its author. Not only is the text employed by the spirits for their own purposes but it is also reconstructed through Byatt's incorporation of certain lyrics into the novella. This reappropriation of *In Memoriam* seems to concur with Barthes's denial of the author as the originator of the meaning of a text.

In the case of *Possession*, however, the situation is reversed. The biographical information discovered about the poets elucidates the significance of their poetic images and thus reasserts them as the authors of their poems. Despite this, Byatt explicitly rejects a purely biographical approach to literature in favour of an approach that is more a composite of the biographical, personal and critical readings represented by the various scholars. The flawed nature of a purely biographical reading is highlighted by Maud's mis-interpretation of the 'Spilt Milk' fragment. Maud assumes the poem articulates LaMotte's feelings on the death of her child yet, as the reader subsequently discovers, Maia did not die but actually lived in the same house as her "aunt" LaMotte. The fact that Maud never discovers her

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<sup>47</sup> Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author,' 1968, trans. Stephen Heath, *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch (London: Norton, 2001). 1466-70.

<sup>48</sup> Michel Foucault, 'What Is an Author?,' 1969, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch (London: Norton, 2001). 1622-36.

mistake does not undermine the point; rather, as the events of the postscript reveal, it highlights that any interpretation, and especially a biographical one, will always be a partial account representing a retrospective construction of the text in accordance with the scholar's own interpretative paradigms. Yet paradoxically, it is biographical evidence that reveals the flaw in Maud's biographical reading and thus Byatt is perhaps suggesting that it is impossible to ever entirely divorce a text from its author and from the historical specificities of the moment of its production.

A biographical reading of LaMotte's poetry is further problematised by the fact that it is a fictional poet we are presented with, who does not have an existence outside of Byatt's novel. Yet in some senses this is not strictly true since LaMotte is clearly modelled on Victorian poets, in particular Christina Rossetti. The possibilities and limitations of biographical readings of literature are just some of the ways in which the boundary between historical and fictional figures is explored in this novel. Indeed, all the neo-Victorian texts in this thesis self-consciously interrogate the boundaries between history and fiction and foreground the question of whether neo-Victorian fictions belong to the category of historical fiction.

### **Historical Figures and Fictional Narratives**

The status of historical personages and facts within fictional texts is one of the fundamental issues for theories of historical fictions. Indeed, it is one of the premises by which Hutcheon differentiates the postmodern form of "historiographic metafiction" from traditional historical novels, adopting Georg Lukács' model as the standard definition of the historical novel. She argues that whilst historical personages are relegated to a supporting role within the historical novel they, along with historical details, fulfil a vital function in the narrative: 'Historical fiction (*pace*

Lukács) usually incorporates and assimilates these data in order to lend a feeling of verifiability [...] to the fictional world.’<sup>49</sup> In traditional historical novels, then, the historical figures are incorporated in order to “authenticate” the fictional world. Hutcheon contrasts “historiographic metafiction” with historical fiction on the grounds of its self-reflexivity. She claims that ‘[h]istoriographic metafiction incorporates, but rarely assimilates such [historical] data. More often, the process of *attempting* to assimilate is what is foregrounded’.<sup>50</sup> Historiographic metafiction deliberately prevents such assimilation in order to problematise the relationship between history and fiction. Yet there have been other responses to the incorporation of historical figures in historical novels. Whilst acknowledging that the co-existence of fictional and historical characters can serve to validate the fictional world, Alison Lee claims that the inverse is equally true: ‘the “real” characters who exist or existed are fictionalized: they both are and are not the entities who are designated by their names.’<sup>51</sup> Neo-Victorian fictions do question the boundary between historical and fictional narratives; they explore the narration of history through fictional modes. Yet because of their commitment to the historical specificity of the Victorian era they maintain a distinction between the historical and fictional figures in their texts.

Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981) serves as a prominent example of the response to historical figures in postmodern fiction. Rushdie includes the figure of Indira Ghandi into his novel but treats her in a way that corresponds to his magic realist approach. This is part of his wider stance in the novel which sees history and fiction as permeable and demonstrates the impossibility of distinguishing

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<sup>49</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988) 114.

<sup>50</sup> Hutcheon, *Poetics*, 114.

<sup>51</sup> Alison Lee, *Realism and Power: Postmodern British Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1990) 46.

between them. Jeanette Winterson adopts a similar approach in her incorporation of Napoleon into the narrative of *The Passion* (1987) and the distortion of the lives of historical figures in the film *Forrest Gump* (1994) provides another example of this. In contrast, neo-Victorian authors refuse the option of ironically adopting the names of historical figures whilst altering the known facts of their lives, or of creating characters to suit their purpose. Instead, neo-Victorian fictions respect the past lives of the historical figures they incorporate by stressing the importance of these figures in their nineteenth-century cultural context. For example, Wilson not only incorporates Lady Eastlake into *The Dark Clue* but also stresses her importance as an amateur photographer in her relations with Walter. In thus respecting the historical specificity of the figures they incorporate, neo-Victorian fictions are reviving the pre-Victorian model of historical fiction, as developed by Scott. For Lukács, Scott's novels represent the standard against which all historical novels should be judged. The quality he prioritises is that which makes them "specifically historical": 'the derivation of the individuality of characters from the historical peculiarity of their age'.<sup>52</sup> Neo-Victorian fictions' commitment to the historical specificity of both the Victorian era and the Victorian figures they depict replicates the stance of Scott's model of historical fiction.

This issue has implications for the process of ventriloquism as it affects the status of the texts incorporated into neo-Victorian texts. In the case of Byatt's two texts, the pseudo-Victorian texts tend to be assigned to her fictional creations whilst the actual Victorian texts are associated with the historical figures responsible for

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<sup>52</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (London: Merlin Press, 1962) 19.



them. Thus Byatt seems to maintain a distinction between Victorian and pseudo-Victorian texts through the characters they are attributed to.

In 'The Conjugal Angel' the incorporated texts are assigned to the historical figures of Tennyson and Hallam. As I have demonstrated, however, the status both of these texts and these figures is problematised by their inclusion within Byatt's fictional narrative. Both Hallam and Tennyson occupy an uneasy position in 'The Conjugal Angel'. Hallam's presence is literally that of a ghost and Tennyson seems close to this position since his presence in the novella is mainly through his poem.<sup>53</sup> The ghostly qualities of Hallam and Tennyson challenge any simplistic conclusion that they are incorporated into the novella to "authenticate" the fictional world. This situation is more apparent in the complex interrelations between the fictional poets in *Possession* and their historical counterparts; whilst LaMotte and Ash are fictional creations, their resemblance to the historical figures of Browning and Rossetti prevent them from being classified as purely fictional figures. Furthermore, there are two instances in *Possession* which prove particularly complex as pseudo-Victorian texts are ascribed to historical figures; indeed, these pseudo-Victorian texts refer to the pseudo-Victorian poets, proving the ontological boundaries between historical and fictional figures to be porous. Although neo-Victorian fictions recognise the complexities of the boundary between historical and fictional figures, they do not deny this boundary but rather assert the historical existence of some figures. Thus, despite modelling her pseudo-Victorian poets on Victorian poets Byatt maintains a distinction between the poets she created and those that had an existence prior to the fictional world of *Possession*.

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<sup>53</sup> Hallam and Tennyson's position as ghosts in 'The Conjugal Angel' is explored in more detail in Chapter 6, in terms of the novella's treatment of spiritualism.

As suggested above, one possible motivation for the incorporation of historical figures into fiction is to authenticate the fictional world. The incorporation of excerpts supposedly taken from Henry Crabb Robinson's diary, the leading diarist of Victorian social and literary life, could be assumed to fulfil this function of authentication. Two of the three excerpts are obviously not actual excerpts from Robinson's diary since they refer to Ash, his poetry and LaMotte. In incorporating references to the fictional Ash and LaMotte, Robinson's diary could be seen as "authenticating" their existence, especially since his entries associate them with notable Victorian figures such as Bagehot. The entries could, however, also have the opposite effect; the references to the fictional poets could be seen as undermining the status of Robinson's texts, revealing them to be imitations written by Byatt herself. This situation is rendered more complex by Byatt's direct quotation of Robinson's diary entry for February 16<sup>th</sup> 1859, which brings into question the status of the other two excerpts as it is almost impossible to distinguish, from the evidence within the novel, between the actual diary entry and Byatt's ventriloquisms.<sup>54</sup>

The incorporation of a text ascribed to Swinburne similarly proves awkward in relation to these issues since it is presented as a direct critical response to LaMotte's 'The Fairy Melusine'. In an extract from a biographical account of Christabel the reader is supposedly presented with Swinburne's response to the poem: 'during the Pre-Raphaelite Period it was admired by certain critics, including Swinburne, who called it, "a quiet, muscular serpent of a tale, with more vigour and venom than is at all usual in the efforts of the female pen, but without narrative thrust; rather, as was Coleridge's Serpent who figured the Imagination, with its tail

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<sup>54</sup> Thomas Sadler, Ed, *Diary, Reminiscences, and Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson* 3Vols. (London: Macmillan & Co, 1869), Vol. III, 463-464.

stuffed in its own mouth”” (P, 37). In this passage, the ontological boundaries between historical and fictional figures are persistently blurred as Byatt presents a fictional figure (Veronica Honiton) quoting a historical figure (Swinburne) responding to a fictional character’s poem (LaMotte’s), in which he quotes another historical figure (Coleridge). Moreover, Swinburne’s comments on LaMotte’s poems recall his critical remarks on the Brontë sisters; of Charlotte he refers to ‘a skill and strength of touch, perhaps incomparable in the work of any other woman.’<sup>55</sup> This instance presents a complicated case of the text’s ventriloquism. At one level, the comments of Swinburne have been ventriloquized by the twentieth-century biographer, Veronica Honiton, as an exemplar of contemporary reactions to Christabel’s poem. In addition, Swinburne is himself ventriloquising Coleridge’s description of the imagination.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, Veronica Honiton’s comments, and possibly even Swinburne’s, have themselves been ventriloquized since they were written by Byatt.

In his discussion of *Possession*, Holmes claims that the illusion of independent historical events created in the novel is ‘undercut [...] by exposing the processes of artifice through which the illusion is created’.<sup>57</sup> Holmes adopts Linda Hutcheon’s theoretical model to account for the incorporated texts in *Possession*: ‘On the one hand, these [interpolated] texts buttress realism by creating the illusion of referring to the world outside the novel [...]. On the other hand, the documents disrupt the initial illusion established by the novel that it is supplying direct access to

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<sup>55</sup> Algernon Charles Swinburne, *A Note on Charlotte Brontë* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1877) 94.

<sup>56</sup> Coleridge’s designation of the imagination as a serpent can be found in his letter to Joseph Cottle dated 7<sup>th</sup> Mar, 1815, quoted in M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (London: Oxford UP, 1971) 271.

<sup>57</sup> Frederick M. Holmes, ‘The Historical Imagination and the Victorian Past: A. S. Byatt’s *Possession*,’ *English Studies in Canada* 20.3 (1994) 319-334, 320.

an independent reality'.<sup>58</sup> Both Holmes and Hutcheon, however, fail to account for the complexities involved in neo-Victorian fiction's use of such "interpolated material". Firstly, whilst these texts are committed to recreating the historical specificity of the Victorian era they do not naively presume that they can present 'direct access to an independent reality', they are aware of the postmodern accounts of the textualisation of history. Yet the presence of such interpolated texts does not entirely undermine the possibility of a direct access to the Victorian era; rather Byatt suggests that literature can provide the best possible means for engaging with the past since it can bring to life the voices, concerns and characters of a past age. Secondly, Holmes fails to address the implications of whether these texts are ascribed to historical or fictional Victorian figures; in fact, he seems blissfully unaware that such a distinction exists. The incorporation of entries from Crabb Robinson's diary and Swinburne's criticism are part of Byatt's commitment to locating her texts (both the neo-Victorian novel and the pseudo-Victorian texts within it) within their specific historical context. This commitment can be seen in the incorporation of historical figures into two other neo-Victorian texts.

Wilson's decision to adopt two characters from Collins's *The Woman in White* as his protagonists could be recuperated into the postmodern stance towards history. It raises the textualisation of history and so questions whether historical people are any less fictional than characters in a novel when the only knowledge we have of them is from texts? Yet Wilson's strategy should be understood in terms of the specificity of the Victorian context he evokes. Rather than making a general point about the textualisation of history Wilson is more specifically highlighting the

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<sup>58</sup> Holmes, 321.

extent to which perceptions of the Victorian era are determined by Victorian fiction. Moreover, in writing a sequel which imagines the after-life of Collins' characters, Wilson is explicitly adopting the process of many readers of nineteenth-century fiction.<sup>59</sup> Although this process could be considered the condition of novel reading it seems particularly prevalent in responses to nineteenth-century fiction, as demonstrated by the numerous sequels, prequels and reimaginings of Victorian fiction. In addition to incorporating figures from Victorian fiction, Wilson also includes two figures from Victorian history: Ruskin and Lady Eastlake. The presence of these two figures in this text will be explored in more detail in relation to the novel's treatment of the biographical mode of history.

*The French Lieutenant's Woman* includes two instances in which figures from the historical world briefly intrude into the fictional world, involving firstly Karl Marx and secondly the Rossettis. In both instances the historical figures are peripheral to the action of the novel, which focuses on the lives of the fictional characters. Marx is incorporated through a fleeting reference to '[...] the beavered German Jew quietly working, as it so happened, that very afternoon in the British Museum library' (*FL*, 16). This reference confirms the historical location of the novel and highlights the significance of Marx's theories for the narrative. Yet it depends upon the reader's pre-existing historical knowledge since Marx is alluded to rather than explicitly identified. The incorporation of the Rossettis follows a similar strategy since the narrator initially only alludes to the painters' identities. Again,

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<sup>59</sup> Both original and modern audiences of Victorian fiction seem to have been seduced by the supposed reality of the characters. This is most vivid in the original responses to the death of Little Nell in Dickens' *The Old Curiosity Shop*. As one reviewer remarked, 'Her death is perhaps the most pathetic scene in the literature of the age. Nothing has so profoundly stirred the world's great heart for many years', [Cornelius C. Felton] *North American Review* (Jan. 1843): 212-37, rpt. in *Dickens: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Philip Collins (London: Routledge, 1971): 130-35, 131. That modern audiences are still seduced in this way is evident in the recent Victoria discussion on empathy with Victorian characters referred to in the Introduction.



then, the identification assumes the reader's knowledge although, unlike the Marx example, the narrator does eventually disclose their identity. The Rossettis, however, are more integrated into the fictional world than Marx since they affect Sarah Woodruff's narrative. Despite this, their incorporation at this point in the novel serves as shorthand for a more liberal attitude towards sexuality, as denoted in the descriptions of the paintings as 'somewhat suspect art' (*FL*, 378). Both instances demonstrate the motivation behind the incorporation of historical figures into neo-Victorian fictions, the incorporation of historical figures provide the specific historical context for the attitudes presented in the narrative.

### **Ventriloquising Realism**

Byatt's narrative style in both 'The Conjugal Angel' and *Possession* should also be considered in relation to the strategy of ventriloquism. In fact, as will be demonstrated in Chapter 2, all of the neo-Victorian texts ventriloquize the genre conventions of Victorian fiction, most notably those of realism. In *Possession*, Byatt adopts the persona of an omniscient, third-person narrator, a convention most commonly, although not necessarily accurately, associated with the nineteenth-century novel. Byatt's adoption of this narrative technique is most clearly apparent in the instances in which the nineteenth-century characters are presented without the mediation of their textual remains. In all of these instances the narrator provides the reader with access to events for which there are no textual remains, a fact that is explicitly declared in the final instance: 'There are things which happen and leave no discernible trace, are not spoken or written of [...]' (*P*, 508). Despite this, the narrator proceeds to recount the event, thus producing a textual account, and even asserts its veracity claiming 'This is how it was' (*P*, 508). This self-reflexive

comment initially appears to challenge the convention of the omniscient narrator by revealing how unrealistic it is. Yet the postscript to Byatt's text establishes an intertextual relationship with the most famous Victorian realist novel, George Eliot's *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life* (1871-72).<sup>60</sup> In the 'Finale' to the novel, Eliot's narrator raises similar issues about the possibilities of narrating events which leave 'no discernible trace': '[...] for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.'<sup>61</sup>

Another way in which *Possession* engages with Victorian realism is through its self-conscious meditation upon the problems of closure. In examining closure, Byatt is again engaging with the figure of the realist narrator; the neat, fixed conclusions considered characteristic of Victorian realist novels derives from the assumption that the narrator occupies a position beyond the events of the narrative and this, together with their supposed omniscience, enables them to tie-up all the loose ends of the novel.<sup>62</sup> Byatt's *Possession* initially seems to be problematising the neat endings of Victorian fiction in the inclusion of a postscript. Indeed, this interpretation is suggested by the characters' self-conscious observations of postmodernism's hostility to neat endings: 'Coherence and closure are deep human desires that are presently unfashionable' (*P*, 422). Thus, by incorporating a postscript Byatt would seem to be suggesting that the narrative can never truly be concluded because there will always be events that are left unnarrated. Conversely,

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<sup>60</sup> See Lodge's discussion of *Middlemarch*'s status as 'the *only* truly representative, truly great Victorian novel' for many critics, 'Middlemarch and the idea of the Classic Realist Text,' 218.

<sup>61</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life* 1871-2, ed. and intro. Rosemary Ashton (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994) 838.

<sup>62</sup> This relationship between endings and realism will be considered in more detail in the next chapter.

the postscript could be seen as providing a traditional sense of closure to the plot of Ash and LaMotte and undermining the sense of inconclusiveness of the previous chapter. Either way, what Byatt is actually challenging is the misperception that Victorian realist novels provide fixed conclusions. As I have said, the postscript establishes an intertextual allusion with Eliot's *Middlemarch* and particularly with its Finale. The Finale of the Victorian text explicitly foregrounds the problematic nature of fictional endings in its opening line: 'Every limit is a beginning as well as an ending'.<sup>63</sup> Rather than a postmodern device, then, Byatt's incorporation of a postscript actually reveals the Victorian realist novel's own problematic relationship to closure, a relationship that will be examined further in Chapter 3.

The narrative voice of 'The Conjugal Angel' can also be understood as a ventriloquism of nineteenth-century language. The use of long, complicated sentences, peppered with subordinate clauses, is perhaps the most overt way in which Byatt emulates the style of nineteenth-century novelists, or rather what, in the popular imagination, has come to be thought of as the style of nineteenth-century novelists. Although 'The Conjugal Angel' overtly adopts a nineteenth-century narratorial perspective there are some elements which seem more akin to modern sensibilities. For instance, the description of Emily Jesse's dog, Pug, displays a frankness concerning bodily functions that would not have been considered decent in Victorian fiction: 'Pug was insensible to the fluctuations of emotion round the table, and tended to lie snoozing on the couch, occasionally even snoring, or emitting other wet, explosive animal noises at the most sensitive moments' ('CA', 172). Although the subject matter may have been deemed inappropriate for a Victorian novel Byatt

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<sup>63</sup> Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 832.

appears to couch it in the language of Victorian middle-class respectability rather than adopting a more direct tone, which would be more suitable in contemporary fiction. The intrusion of twentieth-century sensibilities into the nineteenth-century narrative style is considered in relation to the historical setting of neo-Victorian fiction, and the related issue of historical anachronism, in the following chapter. This chapter will also include a fuller discussion of neo-Victorian fictions' ventriloquism of realism.

As I have shown, the neo-Victorian texts under discussion employ the strategy of ventriloquism in a variety of ways, ranging from incorporating Victorian texts to imitating the omniscient third-person narrative style considered characteristic of Victorian literature. Whichever strategy is adopted, however, the texts always establish a critical distance between the "originals" and their imitations and so exist in dialogue with them, not as replacements. Thus the version of *In Memoriam* presented in 'The Conjugal Angel' both is and is not the version published by Tennyson in 1850. This is even more apparent in the transformations of Browning and Rossetti's poems that occur when they provide the models for the pseudo-Victorian texts of Ash and LaMotte. Similarly, in highlighting the absence of a historical record for the events narrated in the postscript, the narrator foregrounds the conventions through which realist narrative operates.

The nature of the relationship between Victorian and pseudo-Victorian texts is especially pertinent in relation to *Possession* since it actually incorporates pseudo-Victorian texts into the narrative itself. Of the pseudo-Victorian poems in *Possession*, Burgass remarks 'Byatt's "Victorian" poetry [...] is in some senses a

simulacrum: the fictional texts are written to resemble closely Victorian originals'.<sup>64</sup> This notion of the pseudo-Victorian in *Possession* as a simulacrum of the Victorian is explicitly commented on within the novel itself. The twentieth-century scholars, Maud and Roland, visit the restored house which LaMotte shared with her companion Blanche Glover. Initially, the house seems to be an exact replica and Maud has trouble distinguishing between the original and restored elements. She says 'You can just see a very Victorian fireplace in there. I can't tell if it's an original or a vamped-up one [...]' (*P*, 210-211). The boundary between the original and the copy, however, is subsequently reinforced in Roland's remark that 'It would have been sootier. It would have looked older. When it was younger' (*P*, 211). A similar response is evoked by the pseudo-Victorian poems in the novel. Although the poems of Ash and LaMotte closely resemble those of Browning and Rossetti they are constructed as responses to rather than replacements of the "originals". Thus, although Ash's *Mummy Possest* is clearly based on Browning's 'Mr. Sludge' it also critically engages with its historical model by reversing the gender-coding.

Contemporary culture's preoccupation with Victorian literature renders it impossible to disentangle from critical responses to it. Thus Byatt's decision to invent Victorian poets in *Possession* can be seen as an attempt to enable the reader to experience Victorian literature freed from the critical apparatus that has overtaken actual Victorian authors. The Victorian poets she creates, however, do conform to critical conceptions of Victorian fiction, proclaiming the inability to ever have an unmediated text. This is especially so in the case of LaMotte's poetry since, as I have shown, Byatt actually wrote 'Melusine' to conform to imagined twentieth-

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<sup>64</sup> Burgass, 51.



century critical responses to it. Although *Possession* demonstrates the impossibility of disentangling Victorian literature from critical responses to it, it is clear that Byatt prioritises creative modes of writing over critical ones. This is often mis-read by critics and reviewers as a valuation of nineteenth-century over twentieth-century literature or of the Victorian texts over their ventriloquisms. For instance, Yelin claims that 'Byatt suggests that Victorian literature is an inscription of value [...] that makes it more enduring, more worthy than its ventriloquizing, belated, postmodern epigones'.<sup>65</sup> Yet *Possession* does not incorporate many instances of "actual" Victorian texts against which the pseudo-Victorian texts are explicitly judged. Rather, Byatt's value judgement is based on the opposition between criticism and literature, not that between twentieth- and nineteenth-century, or even pseudo-Victorian and Victorian, texts.

Towards the end of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* the reader is presented with a poem supposedly written by Charles Smithson, the treatment of which provides an explicit evaluation of the status of pseudo-Victorian texts. This poem is positioned within the narrative itself rather than as an epigraph, indicating the lesser authority of the pseudo-Victorian poem in comparison with the Victorian poems, which are literally elevated above the narrative. Furthermore, this negative evaluation of Charles's poem is explicitly articulated by the narrator, who apologises in advance for presenting the poem and then exculpates himself by quoting Matthew Arnold's 'To Marguerite' saying 'And to get the taste of that from your mouth, let me quote a far greater poem [...] perhaps the noblest short poem of the whole Victorian era' (*FL*, 365). In this assessment Fowles reasserts his commitment to the

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<sup>65</sup> Yelin, 39.

historical specificity of these modes and claims that it is possible, and indeed, necessary to distinguish between them. Yet, in contrast to the other neo-Victorian authors discussed in this thesis, Fowles does judge between the two modes and prioritises the earlier, Victorian mode over his own ventriloquism of it.

Neo-Victorian fiction's commitment to the historical specificity of the Victorian era suggests a need to engage with Victorian literature and culture in its own terms and not through television and film adaptations which seek to render them "relevant" for a contemporary audience. Moreover, *Possession*'s ventriloquism of theoretical modes of discourse reveals that criticism is complicit in a similar process of recuperating the ideologies of Victorian fiction for a contemporary model. In prioritising the historical context, these texts reveal the differences between the Victorian and contemporary cultural situation and so preclude a nostalgic escape into or romanticisation of Victorian literature. In *Possession* the twentieth-century texts that frame and interpret the Victorian texts prevent a nostalgic return to the forms of Victorian literature by highlighting their historical distance from the circumstances of contemporary society. In 'The Conjugal Angel', this process is not as explicit because of the absence of a twentieth-century mediating frame. Yet the inclusion of the untold narrative of Emily Jesse in that novella reveals the implicit gender politics within *In Memoriam*. As a consequence of this commitment to the historical context of the texts they incorporate or ventriloquize, neither 'The Conjugal Angel' nor *Possession* pass judgement on the relative values of the pseudo-Victorian and Victorian texts with which they engage. Rather, they assert the need to understand both Victorian and pseudo-Victorian forms in relation to their specific, and distinct, historical contexts.

In their ventriloquism of nineteenth-century narrative styles and conventions, neo-Victorian texts could also be considered as pseudo-Victorian texts. This is especially applicable to *The Quincunx*, *Angels and Insects*, *The Dark Clue* and the nineteenth-century elements of *Possession* which, although written in the twentieth century, present themselves as nineteenth-century texts.<sup>66</sup> Thus the consideration of pseudo-Victorian and Victorian texts provides a useful analogue for the relationship between neo-Victorian and Victorian fiction. These neo-Victorian texts do not indulge in a nostalgic desire to replicate the forms of Victorian fiction. They are aware of the specific historical circumstances that produced those forms and the transformations within contemporary society that render them inappropriate for contemporary fiction. Consequently, these fictions engage with Victorian modes of historical and fictional narrative to explore the continuities and discontinuities between the Victorian and contemporary forms of the narratives. Certain reviewers implicitly devalue neo-Victorian texts in relation to their Victorian models. Bernard Martin says of *The Quincunx* 'Dickens knew that touches of humour increased credibility, a lesson Charles Palliser might have learned from him. So far as I can remember, in all these pages there is not a wistful smile, let alone a healthy burst of laughter'.<sup>67</sup> In this thesis, I adopt the approach of the neo-Victorian authors themselves. I resist both a teleological approach that would value the neo-Victorian texts over their Victorian models and a nostalgic prioritisation of the Victorian intertexts. Rather I conceive of neo-Victorian fiction as a historically distinct form

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<sup>66</sup> Holmes claims that '*Possession* is Victorian in the configuration of its narrative as well as in subject matter,' 322.

<sup>67</sup> Robert Bernard Martin, 'An Underworld Without Pattern,' *TLS* 15 Sept. 1989: 1006. See also Edworthy's disappointment with the ending of *the Quincunx*, which she compares to *Great Expectations*, Sarah Edworthy, 'Philosophical belly-ache of the office lunch', *The Times* 12 Oct. 1989, 19.

that is responding to the particular conditions of its moment of production.

Consequently, whilst it should be considered in relation to Victorian fiction it is not setting itself up as a competitor to the Victorian models it adopts. Throughout this thesis I will locate the Victorian and contemporary forms of the fictional and historical narratives in their specific historical contexts in order to identify both the continuities and discontinuities between them.

The subsequent chapters will explore the treatment of various historical narratives in neo-Victorian fiction. Chapter 3 considers the grand narratives of Darwinism and Marxism in relation to *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and 'Morpho Eugenia'; Chapter 4 discusses the forms of genealogical narrative in *The Quincunx*; Chapter 5 analyses biographical narrative in *The Biographer's Tale* and *The Dark Clue*; whilst Chapter 6 engages with the forms of spiritualism explored in *Possession* and 'The Conjugal Angel'. Before I embark on my analysis of these specific historical narratives, however, the following chapter will examine neo-Victorian fictions' position within the various theoretical frameworks of postmodern and historical fiction.

## Chapter Two

### Locating the Past: The Context of Neo-Victorian Fiction

The neo-Victorian texts discussed in this thesis exhibit several features considered characteristic of postmodern fiction, which are often cited by commentators as proof of their postmodern status. For instance, Gian Balsamo claims the ‘blend of truth and un-truth, of reality and unreality’ in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* is ‘one of the canonic elements of postmodern fiction’.<sup>1</sup> Since all the neo-Victorian texts present a similar mix of truth and untruth they could all be classified as postmodernist according to Balsamo’s definition.<sup>2</sup> Chris Alsop declares that in its self-conscious meditations upon reading, *Possession* is ‘part of a more general postmodernist movement towards an increasingly “self-reflexive”, knowing “critical creativity” [...]’.<sup>3</sup> Again, this claim could be extended to most of the other texts, especially *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* which, according to Hutcheon, is a ‘kind of summation of metafictional techniques’.<sup>4</sup> In Hulbert’s discussion of *Possession*, the combination of various genres and voices, which can be found in all these texts, is cited as an example of ‘good postmodern manner’.<sup>5</sup> That neo-Victorian texts share several features with and are often characterised as postmodern

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<sup>1</sup> Gian Balsamo, ‘The Narrative Text as Historical Artifact: The Case of John Fowles,’ *Image and Ideology in Modern/Postmodern Discourse*, eds. David B. Downing and Susan Bazargan (Albany: State U of New York P, 1991) 148.

<sup>2</sup> See Ruth Franklin, ‘Inauthentic Fabrics,’ rev. of *The Biographer’s Tale* and *On Histories and Stories* by A. S. Byatt, *The New Republic*, 23 April 2003: 37-40, 38; and Marilyn Butler, ‘The Moth and the Medium,’ rev. of *Angels and Insects* by A. S. Byatt, *TLS*, 16 Oct 1992: 22.

<sup>3</sup> Chris Walsh, ‘Postmodernist Readings: *Possession*,’ *The Practice of Reading: Interpreting the Novel*, eds. David Alsop and Chris Walsh (London: Macmillan, 1999): 163-183, 164.

<sup>4</sup> Linda Hutcheon, ‘The Real World(s) of Fiction: *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*,’ *English Studies in Canada* 4.1 (1978): 81-94, 81.

<sup>5</sup> Ann Hulbert, ‘The Great Ventriloquist: A. S. Byatt’s *Possession: A Romance*,’ *Contemporary British Women Writers: Texts and Strategies*, ed. Robert E. Hosmer Jr. (London: Macmillan, 1993) 55-64, 56.



texts is unsurprising since this contemporary interest in the Victorians occurs within the context of postmodernism's concern with the past.

Yet, as I will demonstrate subsequently, the intertextual relationship these neo-Victorian texts establish with Victorian fiction prompts a recognition of the presence of such supposedly characteristic postmodern features within Victorian fiction. The presence of such features in Victorian fiction, however, does not mean that nineteenth-century novels should be reconceived as either postmodernist or proto-postmodernist. Rather it reveals the limitations of such categories and undermines the narrative of literary development which simplifies the complexities of Victorian fiction in order to assert the sophistication of postmodern texts.<sup>6</sup> Neo-Victorian texts, however, reject such a narrative, in highlighting the presence of such "postmodern" features within Victorian fiction they destabilise the very category "postmodernism". My thesis rejects such a teleological approach by exploring the complex double relationship established between neo-Victorian and Victorian fiction and engaging directly with the complexities of Victorian fiction. Examining the Victorian context of these texts reveals that neo-Victorian fiction cannot simply be reduced to the categories of postmodernism. Reading Victorian literature through the neo-Victorian texts undermines a progressive narrative of literary history and further destabilises the category of postmodernism. Whilst I am more interested in neo-Victorian fiction's relationship to the Victorian era, these texts emerged out of the cultural context of postmodernism and so it is necessary to explore their relationship to postmodernism and to identify the limitations involved in such classifications.

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<sup>6</sup> Examples of such an approach can be found in introductions to postmodernism. See, for instance, Glen Ward, *Postmodernism* (London: Hodder Headline, 1997); and Christopher Butler, *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002).

Although there are problems entailed in the term “postmodern” it is necessary to adopt such a signpost when discussing literature of the last few decades of the twentieth century. In this thesis I use “postmodernism” to refer to both certain trends in post-World War Two culture and recent developments in critical theory. One of the most prominent trends in post-war culture is an increased interest in history, which manifests itself in numerous television documentaries, films, and novels that take historical subjects as their starting point, ranging from prehistoric times, to the very beginnings of human history, and right up to the very recent past.<sup>7</sup> A first step in addressing the postmodern context of these texts would be to consider them within the frameworks of Lyotard’s and Jameson’s conception of postmodernism since of the many accounts of postmodernism these are most concerned with questions of historiography.

One of the most famous pronouncements concerning the contemporary relationship to the past is Jean-François Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979). Lyotard argues that since the end of the nineteenth century the status of knowledge has been altered by social transformations, to the extent that we no longer believe in the all encompassing narratives he defines as grand narratives. Lyotard claims that not only is the postmodern condition characterised by ‘incredulity towards meta-narratives’, but also that we have lost the nostalgia for the lost narratives.<sup>8</sup> Despite denying the credibility of grand narratives, Lyotard claims that the postmodern is the epoch in human history when we begin to

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<sup>7</sup> Del Ivan Janik claims that the literature of the post-war generation of writers, such as Ackroyd, Barnes and Swift, is ‘characterized by a foregrounding of the historical consciousness [...]’ ‘No End of History: Evidence from the Contemporary English Novel,’ *Twentieth Century Literature* 41.2 (1995): 160-189, 161. See also Margaret Scanlan, *Traces of Another Time: History and Politics in Postwar British Fiction* (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1990).

<sup>8</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington & Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1987) xxiv, 41.

think about history and time in general. Thus, the postmodern condition is characterised by a historical consciousness. Yet in spite of categorising postmodernism as an epoch, Lyotard does not conceive of it as a historical concept, he denies a chronological narrative and declares that 'A work can only be modern if it is first postmodern.'<sup>9</sup>

In contrast to Lyotard, Fredric Jameson conceptualises postmodernism as a historical phenomenon. As a Marxist critic, Jameson argues for the importance of economic circumstances on cultural production and thus insists that postmodernism is not a stylistic but a periodizing concept that is intimately connected to the economic state of late capitalism.<sup>10</sup> Despite his insistence that postmodernism is related to the historical circumstances of its production, Jameson denies postmodernism itself any interest in documentary history. He argues that postmodernism is 'the displacement of time, the spatialization of the temporal'<sup>11</sup> and thus any attempts to recuperate the past are only ever interested in reproducing the aesthetic styles of the past. Speaking specifically of architecture, Jameson defines postmodern historicism as 'the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion'.<sup>12</sup> Although I agree with Jameson's characterisation of the postmodern attitude towards the past, neo-Victorian texts resist this random cannibalization of the past and are interested in more than just the styles of the past. Consequently, neo-Victorian fiction cannot be explained or accounted for by such accounts of postmodernism.

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<sup>9</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 79.

<sup>10</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism; or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1993) 3, 35-36.

<sup>11</sup> Jameson, 156.

<sup>12</sup> Jameson, 18.

These theories are concurrent with a general move towards revisionist history, which undermines the official historical narrative by highlighting the absences and biases in it. Such projects are undertaken from a range of cultural and intellectual positions, such as feminism and post-colonialism, and implicitly challenge the notion that there can ever be a complete account of the past by revealing the extent to which history is determined by the priorities of its narrators.<sup>13</sup> These ideas concerning history are explored in a body of fictional texts usually designated as “postmodern”. This could also be seen as a post-war phenomenon since the fragmentation and devastation caused by the war prompted many writers to return to the past in an effort to rediscover coherence and meaning. Yet the war had rendered that past increasingly inaccessible, both physically through the destruction of records and psychologically because of the traumatic effects of the experience.<sup>14</sup> Texts that engage in this return to history not only undermine the official version of history by presenting alternatives to it, but also interrogate the boundary between history and fiction and question the ontological status of historical facts. Prominent examples of this type of fiction include Philip K. Dick’s *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), Julian Barnes’s *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* (1989), Graham Swift’s *Waterland* (1983) and Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981).

Neo-Victorian fiction develops out of this postmodern and post-war concern with the accessibility/inaccessibility of the past, yet it cannot simply be subsumed into this cultural phenomenon. The historical location of these narratives, their engagement with the specificities of the Victorian era, alters their approach to the

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<sup>13</sup> Hayden White’s *Metahistory* (1973) provided the theoretical foundations for such projects by highlighting the narrative nature of all historical accounts. Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1973).

<sup>14</sup> See Peter Middleton and Tim Woods, *Literatures of Memory: History, Time and Space in Postwar Writing* (Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 2000).



issues of historicism and distinguishes them from other postmodern fictions; the Victorian rather than postmodern context is their defining characteristic. Consequently, the persistent condemnations of postmodernism's ahistoricism are inapplicable to neo-Victorian fictions. Jameson's denunciation of the "historical deafness" of postmodernism is justified in relation to certain cultural spheres, most obviously fashion and films, and also some postmodern historical novels.<sup>15</sup> Yet the importance of the Victorian location for neo-Victorian fictions, and their commitment to recreating a historically specific picture of the Victorian era excuses them from the charge of "historical deafness."<sup>16</sup>

Linda Hutcheon's theory of "historiographic metafiction" provides a more appropriate framework for discussing neo-Victorian fiction since it counters criticisms, such as Jameson's, that postmodernism is ahistorical.<sup>17</sup> Hutcheon defines "historiographic metafiction" as 'novels that are intensely self-reflexive but that also both re-introduce historical context into metafiction and problematize the entire question of historical knowledge'.<sup>18</sup> For Hutcheon, historiographic metafiction is the characteristic genre of postmodern literature, not only because of its proliferation but also because it encapsulates the very contradictions at work in postmodernism itself. In making the category of "historiographic metafiction" synonymous with postmodernism, however, Hutcheon renders it too inclusive as it encompasses texts that are not as interested in recreating the historical specificity of a particular era as

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<sup>15</sup> Jameson gives E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* as an example of a contemporary historical novel that merely recreates the styles of the past, 21-25.

<sup>16</sup> Jameson, xi.

<sup>17</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988).

<sup>18</sup> Linda Hutcheon, "'The Pastime of Past Time': Fiction, History, Historical Metafiction," *Essentials of the Theory of Fiction*, eds. Michael J. Hoffman and Patrick D. Murphy (London: Leicester UP, 1996), 473-495, 474.



neo-Victorian fictions.<sup>19</sup> As the term implies there are two, apparently paradoxical, impulses present within the works Hutcheon designates as historiographic metafiction. The term historiographic signals its commitment to both the social and historical world and to epistemological questions regarding the nature of history, whilst metafiction highlights its fascination with the workings of literature.

This definition provides a useful starting point for theorising neo-Victorian texts since it incorporates both the self-reflexive elements that cause them to be identified as postmodern and their interest in history. Yet it is necessary to refine Hutcheon's definition as the singularity of the Victorian setting of neo-Victorian fictions distinguishes them from other "historiographic metafiction". Hutcheon asserts that 'There is no dialectic in the postmodern: the self-reflexive remains distinct from its traditionally accepted contrary – the historico-political context in which it is embedded.'<sup>20</sup> In the case of neo-Victorian fiction, however, these two elements are more interrelated than Hutcheon's definition allows. The adoption of metafictional strategies in neo-Victorian fiction is deeply implicated in the historical location of the Victorian era. The metafictional aspects of neo-Victorian texts are inflected with a self-conscious questioning of the possibilities of narrative in general, read in relation to Victorian forms of narrative. For instance, in interrogating the conventions for endings, neo-Victorian texts do not merely indulge in postmodern game-playing but rather explore the specific problems of closure in Victorian fiction. Similarly, their historical elements are related to their self-reflexivity, the texts are not merely located in the Victorian era but also demonstrate a self-conscious

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<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, Stephen Baker argues the opposite, claiming that Hutcheon's category is too exclusive since it can not accommodate those postmodern texts that do not engage with history. *The Fiction of Postmodernity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2000) 4.

<sup>20</sup> Hutcheon, *Poetics*, x.

awareness of and questioning of the modes of historical knowledge available in that era. Thus, the self-conscious meditations upon various forms of historical narrative, such as genealogy, are informed by an awareness of the Victorian forms of that narrative. What is it, then, about the Victorian era that prompts authors to write historiographic metafiction rather than traditional historical fictions? And, more basically, what is it about the Victorian era that sparks so much interest?

At the most fundamental level, the Victorians occupy a central place in the contemporary cultural imagination because of their historical positioning in relation to the twentieth century. At the time when neo-Victorian fiction came to prominence as a significant form of contemporary fiction, around the late 1980s, it was still possible to encounter people who had lived through at least part of Queen Victoria's reign. The Victorians occupy a similar place to our grandparents, they are close enough for us to be aware that we have descended from them and yet far enough away for there to be significant differences in life-styles. The development of new techniques for documenting individuals, in particular census records and photography, extended the opportunities for Victorians to leave behind physical records of their time. Whilst these remains provide access to the Victorian past by providing vivid physical illustrations they also prompt a recognition of the immense differences between the Victorian way of life and our own. Thus physical remains such as photographs both affirm and yet undermine the closeness of the Victorians to us.<sup>21</sup> Authors themselves often attribute their decision to write neo-Victorian fiction

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<sup>21</sup> Jennifer Green-Lewis addresses this paradox in photographs of the Victorians: 'The Victorians continue to exist in the absolute and paradoxical present of the photograph, always there yet gone forever; both in, and out, of history; always already dead – yet still alive'. 'At Home in the Nineteenth Century: Photography, Nostalgia, and the Will to Authenticity,' *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century*, eds. John Kucich and Dianne F. Sadoff (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2000) 29-48, 31.

to this dual position occupied by the Victorians. In response to the question of why we are so fascinated by the Victorians, Sarah Waters claimed 'It is the mix of the familiar and the utterly strange that draws me to the nineteenth century.'<sup>22</sup> Although Waters identifies both elements of this dual position, critical accounts construct one of two narratives, emphasising either the strangeness or the familiarity of the Victorians.

The first of these narratives argues that contemporary culture is characterised by division and fragmentation, a loss of faith in the certainties of grand narratives, whereas the Victorian era is seen as a period of certainty, when faith was possible and there was a confident belief in the progress of human society. Critics subscribing to this view contend that the return to the Victorian era is prompted by an awareness of its difference from our own period and a nostalgic desire to recuperate that lost era of certainty. Shuttleworth appears to adhere to this view in asserting that the Darwinian order in neo-Victorian fiction 'takes on a reassuring, almost sentimental appeal.'<sup>23</sup> An opposing narrative is proposed by those critics who seek to undermine the perception of the Victorian era as a time of solid and stable belief systems, arguing instead that it was actually characterised by uncertainty and doubt and was as fractured as the postmodern period. Such accounts often posit the nineteenth century as a moment of transition, marking the advent of the modern society we now inhabit.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, they interpret the current return to the

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<sup>22</sup> 'Michel Faber, Sarah Waters and Matthew Sweet on the Victorians,' Edinburgh International Book Festival, Charlotte Square Gardens, Edinburgh, 14 Aug. 2002.

<sup>23</sup> Sally Shuttleworth, 'Natural History: The Retro-Victorian Novel,' *The Third Culture: Literature and Science*, ed. Elinor S. Shaffer (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1998) 253-268, 259.

<sup>24</sup> Kucich and Sadoff argue that postmodernism is obsessed with 'the telltale instants of historical rupture' of which the nineteenth century is one. 'Introduction: Histories of the Present,' *Victorian Afterlife*, ix-xxx, x. John Plunkett's *Queen Victoria: First Media Monarch* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003) adopts this approach arguing that Queen Victoria's reign marked the beginnings of a still present symbiotic relationship between the media and the monarchy. For a criticism of this

Victorian era as prompted by a sense of recognition. Schor examines Byatt's neo-Victorian fiction from this perspective, concluding that 'The Victorians [...] matter not for their answers but for their bewilderment.'<sup>25</sup>

There is no clear-cut opposition between these two narratives, however, as certain arguments simultaneously suggest nostalgia for the Victorian era whilst recognising that it was not necessarily an era of certainty. Thus, Shuttleworth states that 'For the Victorians there was a decisive crisis of faith, a sense that the world was shaking under them, an ecstatic agony of indecision. For the post-modern era no such form of crisis seems possible, for there are no fixed boundaries of belief.'<sup>26</sup> This argument depends upon a perception of the Victorian era as itself a time of crisis, which retains its nostalgic appeal since in the postmodern era even the possibility of such a crisis has been lost. These opposing critical narratives are examined in the following chapter which considers the specific Victorian narratives of Darwinism and Marxism.

As I have said, the Victorian location of these texts impacts upon their treatment of historiography and so distinguishes neo-Victorian fictions from other postmodern texts belonging to Hutcheon's category of historiographic metafiction. Like other historiographic metafictions, these neo-Victorian texts interrogate historical narratives, but they are clearly grounded in nineteenth-century forms of those narratives. Whilst the process of ventriloquism adopted by Byatt does have its counterpart in historiographic metafictions located in other periods, the particular

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'intellectual fashion for assimilating the past to the present' see Daniel Karlin's review of Plunkett's book. 'Hold the Front Page,' *TLS* 11 July 2003: 9.

<sup>25</sup> Hilary M. Schor, 'Sorting, Morphing, and Mourning: A. S. Byatt Ghostwrites Victorian Fiction,' *Victorian Afterlife*, 234-251, 235.

<sup>26</sup> Shuttleworth, 260. This relates to the discussion of open and closed texts in Chapter 3 as it suggests that postmodern fictions need fixed boundaries against which to react.



occurrence of it in neo-Victorian fiction is clearly related to the technique of ventriloquism adopted by Victorian writers, most notably in the dramatic monologues of Robert Browning. *The Biographer's Tale* and *The Dark Clue* belong to a sub-category of historiographic metafiction which focuses on the biographical mode of history, such as Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984) and Barry Unsworth's *Losing Nelson* (1999). Yet the engagement with biographical modes in the neo-Victorian texts is intrinsically related to Victorian conceptions of biography, not only in their treatment of Victorian subjects but also in the connections they establish with the development of photography during the nineteenth century. Similarly, contemporary texts such as Julian Barnes's *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* (1989) and Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983) address questions concerning the role of grand narratives within history, and even the grand narrative of history itself; yet the neo-Victorian novels that address these issues are distinguished by their engagement with specifically Victorian grand narratives. *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and 'Morpho Eugenia' are concerned with the formation of two Victorian narratives, Darwinism and Marxism, and explore the specific historical context from which they emerged. *The Quincunx*'s engagement with genealogy is distinguished from other such texts, for instance Angela Carter's *Wise Children* (1991), in its focus on a particular historical form of genealogy. Palliser's novel explores the impact of the establishment, in the nineteenth century, of censuses and births, deaths and marriages' registers on genealogical practices. Although other historiographic metafiction, such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), use ghosts to consider the relationship between the present and the past, in Byatt's *Possession* and 'The



Conjugal Angel' this concern is grounded in the particular historical forms of mid- to late-nineteenth-century spiritualism.

Hutcheon's association of "historiographic metafiction" with postmodernism renders it problematic for my purposes since the Victorian, rather than postmodern context is the defining characteristic of neo-Victorian fiction. Despite the debate over whether postmodernism is an extension of, or departure from, modernism, it is almost always defined in relation to its direct antecedent. Hutcheon explicitly conceives of "historiographic metafiction" in these terms, claiming that the paradox within historiographic metafiction replicates the ambivalent relationship that postmodernism has with modernism. Thus, the metafictional element highlights postmodernism's continuation and development of modernism's self-reflexivity whilst the historiographic aspect reflects its rejection of the ahistoricism of modernism's commitment to 'art for art's sake'.<sup>27</sup> Very few theorists of the postmodern ever address the relationship between postmodernism and the nineteenth century, with the possible exception of Ihab Hassan. Acknowledging that there is no clear boundary separating modernism from postmodernism, Hassan claims that 'history is a palimpsest, and culture is permeable to time past, time present, and time future. We are all, I suspect, a little Victorian, Modern, and Postmodern, at once.'<sup>28</sup> This statement, however, is not supported by any subsequent examination of the relationship between the postmodern and Victorian eras. This deficiency in examining the relationship between postmodernism and the nineteenth century contributes to my rejection of postmodernism as a useful concept for discussing neo-Victorian fiction.

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<sup>27</sup> See Hutcheon, *Poetics*, passim.

<sup>28</sup> Ihab Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture* (Ohio: Ohio State UP, 1987) 88.

My approach in this thesis corresponds to that of the neo-Victorian authors. I consider neo-Victorian fiction in relation to both its postmodern and Victorian contexts to demonstrate that these texts are reducible to neither and highlight the limitations of such categories, especially that of postmodernism. My discussion of supposedly postmodern features within neo-Victorian texts provides a means for discussing the presence of such features within Victorian fiction. Rather than citing the existence of such features as evidence of the postmodern status of Victorian novels, however, I propose they be considered in their historically specific context. Thus, the problematic nature of endings within Victorian fiction is considered in relation to the cultural anxieties produced by scientific developments, especially Darwinism. By reinstating the historical context of such literary features, I avoid imposing a teleological narrative which considers the Victorian forms of these techniques as a less sophisticated precursor to their full emergence within postmodern fiction.<sup>29</sup>

Moreover, the presence of supposedly postmodern features within Victorian fiction, such as self-reflexivity and inconclusiveness, highlights the extent to which these features are endemic to the novel. The presence of these features within Victorian fiction may have been obscured by the confidence with which “Victorian Conventions” are discussed.<sup>30</sup> The notion that there exists a fixed set of available conventions within Victorian fiction is perpetuated by the continued popularity of the Victorian novel. The general reader is likely to have a wider experience of

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<sup>29</sup> Jay Clayton traces the presence of postmodern features within Dickens’s fiction, concluding that ‘postmodernism is not the dawning of a new age but the realization of certain possibilities within Western society that were salient even in the time of Dickens’. ‘Dickens and the Genealogy of Postmodernism,’ *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 46.2 (1991): 181-195, 195. Such an approach preserves an evolutionist attitude in its suggestion that postmodernism is able to fully realise elements that could only exist below the surface in Victorian fiction.

<sup>30</sup> See for instance John R. Reed, *Victorian Conventions* (Ohio: Ohio UP, 1975).

nineteenth-century than eighteenth-century or modernist novels, thus, as I suggested in Chapter 1, the popular sense of the novel genre is dominated by the forms it took in the nineteenth century. This need to identify fixed rules and conventions within Victorian fiction responds to the desire to construct the period as a time of certainties in contrast to our own sceptical and playful period. A consideration of actual Victorian novels, such as the analysis of endings in Chapter 3, reveals the extent to which this notion of fixed conventions is itself a fiction. This would seem to correspond to the narrative of continuity identified above in suggesting that Victorian fiction shares postmodern fiction's self-consciousness about closure. Since these features are endemic to the novel itself, there is an element of continuity between the Victorian and postmodern manifestations of these characteristics. Yet in their commitment to the historical specificity of the Victorian era, neo-Victorian texts reveal the extent to which these features are produced by the specific cultural anxieties of the time. Consequently, neo-Victorian fiction does not propose a simplistic return to the fictional forms of the past since they recognise the differences between the contemporary and Victorian cultural contexts.

### **History in the Nineteenth-Century**

The Victorian location of these historiographic metafiction impacts upon their treatment of historiography and so a consideration of the position of history within the nineteenth century will illuminate the decision to return to the Victorian era. The nineteenth century was intensely interested in history, both in terms of its valuation of the past and its consciousness of its own position within history.<sup>31</sup> The

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<sup>31</sup> For Philippa Levine this is characteristic of the paradox she sees at the heart of Victorian culture. *The Amateur and the Professional: Antiquarians, Historians and Archaeologists in Victorian England, 1838-1886* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986) 1.

proliferation of historical romances after Scott attests to a strong antiquarian interest in the fashion and manners of the past, which also manifested in the various forms of revivalism undertaken by Victorian intellectuals, spanning the fields of architecture (Ruskin's Gothic revival), art (the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's return to the medieval world of Arthur) and poetry (Browning's fascination with figures from the Renaissance).<sup>32</sup> Thus, in returning to the Victorian past, neo-Victorian texts are actually engaging in a process that was already an important part of Victorian culture.<sup>33</sup> In addition to this fascination with past ages, the Victorians were also profoundly self-conscious concerning their own position within history:

We *are* on the threshold of a great time, even if our time is not great itself. In science, in religion, in social organisation, we all know what great things are in the air. "We shall see it, but not *now*" – or rather our children and our children's children will see it. [...] It is the age of great expectation and unwearied striving after better things.<sup>34</sup>

This belief that the Victorian era was moving towards a better future suggests an explanation for the importance of history to a period so immersed in the ideology of progress. The study of history enabled the Victorians to regard the past with the self-satisfied assurance that progress had been made and that human history had reached an advanced stage of its development.<sup>35</sup>

These two historical impulses, an attraction to the past and a self-conscious awareness concerning the historical position of the present, are not necessarily

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<sup>32</sup> See James C. Simmons, *The Novelist as Historian: Essays on the Victorian Historical Novel* (The Hague, Paris: Mouton, 1973) 14. For a discussion of these various forms of Victorian revivalism see A. Dwight Culler, *The Victorian Mirror of History* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1985) chapters 7, 8, 9 and 10.

<sup>33</sup> See Christine L. Kreuger 'Introduction,' *Functions of Victorian Culture at the Present Time*, ed. Christine L. Kreuger (Athens: Ohio UP, 2002) xi-xx, xi.

<sup>34</sup> Frederic Harrison, 'A Few Words About the Nineteenth Century,' 1882, rptd. *The Choice of Books and Other Literary Pieces* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1886): 417-447, 425.

<sup>35</sup> See Andrew Sanders *The Victorian Historical Novel, 1840-1880* (Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1978) 30.



contradictory; Victorians looked into the past in order to find analogues for their present situation.<sup>36</sup> Although nineteenth-century historians recognised the external differences between the present and the past ‘they agreed that the mirror of history provided a perspective glass which enabled one to see through contemporary controversy to more lasting truth’.<sup>37</sup> Victorians also returned to history in order to assert their difference from the past: ‘indeed, in the course of looking to the past it became conscious of the distinctive characteristics of the present.’<sup>38</sup> Part of this distinction of the present was founded on the assumption of the progress that had been achieved in the Victorian era. The desire to document the social world can be seen as fuelled by this ideology of progress. The development of practices such as censuses and the registration of births, deaths and marriages in the nineteenth century initially appear to have been prompted by an interest in the present and a concern with social policy. Yet they were also implicitly a record for posterity since they enabled the Victorians to identify and quantify the effect of their improvements and to leave a record of their achievements for future generations to assess.

Despite the significance attached to history within Victorian culture, historical fiction is often perceived as one of the few areas of literary production in which the Victorians did not achieve much success. John Bowen argues that ‘[...] for all that it was produced in such a propitious climate, much historical fiction of the period can only be judged to fail, often quite spectacularly’.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, even contemporary commentators disparaged the historical fictions produced in the nineteenth century. As George Henry Lewes wryly commented: ‘To write a good

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<sup>36</sup> See Culler, 3-4.

<sup>37</sup> Culler, 3.

<sup>38</sup> Culler, 284.

<sup>39</sup> John Bowen, ‘The Historical Novel,’ *A Companion to the Victorian Novel*, eds. Patrick Brantlinger and William B. Thesing (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 244-259, 245.



historical romance is no easy task; to write such as are published [...] is, we believe, one of the easiest of all literary tasks.<sup>40</sup> I believe this lack of appreciation for Victorian historical fiction has stimulated the current surge in historical fictions set in the Victorian era. Neo-Victorian authors are aware of the difficulties inherent in historical fiction and realise that a recuperation of Victorian historical fiction can not be achieved through a nostalgic recreation of the past, which may account for their adoption of the form of historiographic metafiction.

One of the reasons why Victorian historical fiction has been judged so negatively is because of the theoretical models by which it is assessed. The most famous conceptualisation of the historical novel is to be found in Georg Lukács's *The Historical Novel* (1962). For Lukács, the novels of Sir Walter Scott provide the benchmark against which all historical fiction must be measured since they achieve the 'specifically historical' in their 'derivation of the individuality of characters from the historical peculiarity of their age'.<sup>41</sup> The Victorians' attitude towards the past sees it as a means to understand the present since the past is part of a progressive movement towards a better state. Consequently, their historical novels are usually less concerned with the 'historical peculiarity' of the age than with understanding the past in relation to their own time. Discussing Eliot's *Romola* and Newman's *Callista*, Sanders comments that 'the struggles of both *Romola* and *Callista* project a very Victorian *Ahnung* backwards into history'.<sup>42</sup> As indicated in the previous chapter, in their commitment to the historical specificity of the past, neo-Victorian fictions revive the form of the historical novel exemplified by Scott.

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<sup>40</sup> George Henry Lewes, 'Historical Romance,' *The Westminster Review* XLV (1846): 34-55, 34.

<sup>41</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (London: Merlin Press, 1962) 19.

<sup>42</sup> Sanders, *The Victorian Historical Novel*, 19.

The other standard definition of historical fiction is Fleishman's criterion that in order to qualify as an historical novel, rather than a novel of the recent past, a novel must be set 'beyond an arbitrary number of years, say 40 – 60 (two generations) [...]'.<sup>43</sup> In recent years, however, the category of history has been transformed, the proliferation of televisual media has enabled events to be reported and thus enter the discourse of history almost as soon as they occur and even universities are offering courses in contemporary history.<sup>44</sup> The almost obsessive documentation of the social circumstances of the Victorian era can be seen as part of a similar process of turning the present into history. The extension of the category of history undermines Fleishman's distinction between historical novels and novels of the recent past. Accordingly, the evaluation of Victorian historical fiction as a spectacular failure would have to be reassessed since the category now includes many texts considered great literature, such as Eliot's *Middlemarch*. Neo-Victorian fictions do not just interrogate the categories of literary history but also genre categories in their re-assessment of Victorian historical fiction; they challenge the popular sense of the homogeneity of the nineteenth century and its literature.

Neo-Victorian fiction's concern with the fictionality of history is usually asserted as a postmodern feature of these texts yet it needs to be analysed in the context of Victorian debates surrounding history. Hutcheon posits the nineteenth century as a transitional moment in the position of history, when history and literature became distinct disciplines, and argues that 'it is this very separation of the literary and the historical that is now being challenged in postmodern theory and

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<sup>43</sup> Avrom Fleishman, *The English Historical Novel: Walter Scott to Virginia Woolf* (London: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1971) 3.

<sup>44</sup> The University of Sussex established a degree in Contemporary History in 1988; see Keith Middlemas, 'In Living Memory' *TES* 10 June 1988: 25.

art.’<sup>45</sup> As Hutcheon recognises, postmodernism challenges the boundaries between fiction and history that were constructed in the nineteenth century; yet her focus on postmodernism prevents any sustained discussion of the complex interrelations between history and literature in the nineteenth century. Indeed, both Hutcheon’s theory and many of the texts she discusses prioritise postmodernism over any other contextual frameworks. Despite considering *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* in some detail, Hutcheon does not extend her analysis to explore how the Victorian approach to history may affect the decision to set historiographic metafiction in the Victorian past. Neo-Victorian texts address the nature of the relationship between history and literature in the nineteenth century by exploring the specific cultural context that prompted the institutionalisation of the division between the two disciplines. By depicting the blurring of the boundary between history and literature within a Victorian context, these texts remind us that the Victorians were themselves aware of the overlap between them.

The institutionalisation of history and literature was part of a cultural transition from a climate of generalised knowledge to one of specialisation which began in the sphere of classical political economy and was then ‘replicated across the range of Victorian intellectual practices [...]’.<sup>46</sup> Within this intellectual climate, history sought to legitimate its status as a separate discipline worthy of academic study by aligning itself with scientific, and eschewing its association with literary, methods.<sup>47</sup> History aspired to the condition of science in its pursuit of the principles

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<sup>45</sup> Hutcheon, *Poetics*, 105.

<sup>46</sup> David Amigoni, *Victorian Biography: Intellectuals and the Ordering of Discourse* (New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993) 8.

<sup>47</sup> As Jann remarks, ‘When historians began to professionalize, they often based their claims to expertise on their scientific research methods,’ *The Art and Science of Victorian History* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1985) xxv.

of objectivity and verifiability. As a popular and accessible genre, biography played an important role in this process of establishing history as a separate discipline operating according to scientific principles.<sup>48</sup> This aspiration towards science can be seen in the opinion of a history professor that 'History was merely a branch of biology. The doings of human beings in the past were to be studied and recorded as cold-bloodedly as the wriggling of insects under the microscope.'<sup>49</sup>

As part of this movement towards a scientific approach, the theories and methodology of the German historian Leopold Von Ranke became accepted as the model for historiography. In contrast to the literary historiographies of Carlyle and Macaulay, Ranke believed that the past should be approached with objectivity and understood in its own terms, not as an analogue for the present: 'It is not up to us to judge about error and truth as such. We merely observe one figure (*Gestalt*) arising side by side with another figure [...]. Our task is to penetrate them to the bottom of their existence and to portray them with complete objectivity'.<sup>50</sup> Thus, the historian should not distort the narrative of the past to accord with his own partisan interests or preconceived notions about the period he is depicting. Ranke's famous dictum that the purpose of history was *wie es eigentlich gewesen* appears to impose the criteria of verifiability and objectivity on the narration of history but actually declares a commitment to the essentials of history.<sup>51</sup> This dictum has been misinterpreted to denote Ranke's commitment to factual history and the objectivity of the historian in

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<sup>48</sup> This role is traced in David Amigoni's study *Victorian Biography* (1993) and forms a substantial part of the argument of Chapter 5.

<sup>49</sup> Taken from Molly Hughes's diary, quoted in Anne Sofer, 'Identity Crisis', *TES* 22 Apr. 1988: 128.

<sup>50</sup> Leopold von Ranke, 'On the Character of Historical Science' (A Manuscript of the 1830s), trans. Wilma A. Iggers, Leopold von Ranke, *The Theory and Practice of History*, ed. and introd. Georg G. Iggers and Konrad von Moltke (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973) 33-46, 42.

<sup>51</sup> Bann has traced the problems of translating this dictum and concludes that whilst Ranke may not have meant to propose a purely factual recreation of the past, it is significant that that is what he has been taken to mean. Stephen Bann, *The Clothing of Clío: A Study of the Representation of History in Nineteenth-Century Britain and France* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984), Chapter 1.



part, as Iggers and von Moltke note, because of the mistranslation of the term *eigentlich* as “actually” instead of “essentially”.<sup>52</sup> Despite this, Ranke is still responsible for promoting a commitment to documentary evidence and scientific methodologies in nineteenth-century historiography.<sup>53</sup> The proposed scientific nature of history had implications for attitudes towards photography in the nineteenth century, which will be explored in Chapter 5.

### **The Sensational Detective: Neo-Victorian Forms of Victorian Genres**

The relationship between neo-Victorian and Victorian texts is most explicit in *The Dark Clue*, which announces itself as a sequel to Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* in its adoption of both the protagonists and the genre conventions of Collins’s novel. *The Woman in White* occupies an uneasy position in relation to genre categories since it incorporates elements of both detective and sensation fiction. Yet it is often confined to the sphere of sensation fiction as it is thought to predate the late-Victorian invention of detective fiction which culminated in the appearance of Sherlock Holmes.<sup>54</sup> Such vigorous assertions, however, are untenable since detective and sensation fiction share many central elements: the gradual discovery of a secret; a crime that needs to be resolved and a figure, usually an amateur rather than a

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<sup>52</sup> See Iggers and von Moltke, Introduction, *Theory and Practice of History*, xv-lxxi, xix-xx.

<sup>53</sup> Iggers and von Moltke adopt Herbert B. Adams’s appellation of Ranke as the “father of historical science”, quoted in Introduction, *Theory and Practice of History*, xv. See also Anthony Grafton, ‘The Footnote From De Thou to Ranke,’ *Proof and Persuasion in History*, theme issue of *History and Theory: Studies in the Philosophy of History* 33 (1994): 53-76.

<sup>54</sup> Winifred Hughes claims that *The Woman in White* is ‘Universally regarded as the archetype of sensation fiction,’ ‘The Sensation Novel,’ *Companion to the Victorian Novel*, eds. Brantlinger and Thesing, 260-278, 268. Indeed, even contemporary reviewers recognised *The Woman in White*’s status as the forerunner of a new genre of sensation fiction, see Margaret Oliphant, ‘Sensation Novels,’ *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* 91 (1862): 564-584, 566. Collins’s later novel *The Moonstone* (1868) is sometimes credited as the first English detective novel. See Scott McCracken, *Pulp: Reading Popular Fiction* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1998) 52; and Stephano Tani, *The Doomed Detective: The contribution of the Detective Novel to Postmodern American and Italian Fiction* (Carbondale & Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1984) 17.



professional, who undertakes to investigate the circumstances and uncover the truth. Moreover, both forms emerged during the mid-nineteenth century and so respond to the same cultural and intellectual context.

*The Dark Clue* demonstrates this blurring of genre categories. It evokes the genre of detective fiction as its protagonists, Marian and Walter, are involved in a process of literary detection through their biographical project. Yet this detective process moves towards the realms of sensation fiction when it is assumed that many of the secrets of Turner's life pertain to his sexual encounters and moreover when Turner's sexual appetites are adopted by Walter, culminating in the rape of his half-sister-in-law Marian in their own home. This event appears to conform to the conventions of sensation fiction since it involves a shocking crime that occurs within and strikes at the very heart of Victorian bourgeois domesticity.<sup>55</sup> Wilson's novel does not merely replicate the conventions of Victorian sensation fiction, but rather alters them in significant ways compatible with the twentieth-century moment of the novel's publication. First, although it may have alluded to it, a Victorian sensation novel would never have portrayed the rape scene as vividly as Wilson does. Secondly, the novel's presentation of the victim is self-consciously presented as Freudian in her awareness that Walter is only enacting what she, at some subconscious level, had so often desired. Finally, there is no satisfactory conclusion to this "crime", Walter is not arrested and Marian and he continue to live in the same house and agree never to mention the events. Although the absence of resolution is generally considered a feature of postmodern fiction the form it takes in *The Dark*

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<sup>55</sup> Hughes claims that sensation fiction diverged from Gothic or Newgate fiction in that it chose to 'locate its shocking events and characters firmly within the ordinary middle-class home and family,' 'The Sensation Novel,' 261. A contemporary reviewer also singled out this aspect arguing that in sensation fiction 'It is on our domestic hearths that we are taught to look for the incredible,' 'Our Novels. The Sensation School,' *Temple Bar* 29 July 1870: 410-424, 422.

*Clue* confirms Victorian stereotypes. That is, Marian and Walter agree to repress the entire incident and avoid any allusion to their sexual encounter in order to preserve the respectability of the Hartright household.

Wilson's neo-Victorian novel is not the only text that engages with the new genre of detective fiction that emerged in the Victorian era; indeed, all of the neo-Victorian texts I am discussing undertake a process of detection at some level. As historiographic metafiction all the texts explicitly attempt to reconstruct the past of the Victorian era. Moreover, they engage with the form of detective fiction through the position in which the reader is placed, the reader is encouraged to turn detective and identify the numerous intertextual allusions to these texts' Victorian predecessors.<sup>56</sup>

*The Quincunx* provides the most explicit engagement with the forms of detective fiction since the plot of the novel hinges upon two unsolved "crimes", that of John Huffam senior's murder and the question of the paternity of John Huffam junior. The detection process in this novel is intimately related to the interrogation of the genealogical approach to history and is examined in detail in Chapter 3. In the novels that incorporate a twentieth-century plot, the twentieth-century characters adopt the position of detectives in relation to the nineteenth-century characters as they undertake to interpret the various "clues" that are left behind and reconstruct a narrative of the past. In *Possession* the twentieth-century scholars read the letters, diaries and poems of Ash and LaMotte in an attempt to uncover their buried secrets. Similarly, Phineas in *The Biographer's Tale* attempts to reconstruct the narrative of a

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<sup>56</sup> Reviewers often indulge in this process; see, for instance, Sarah Edworthy, 'Philosophical belly-ache of the office lunch', *The Times* 12 Oct. 1989, 19. Indeed, Matthew Beaumont's review of Wilson's *The Dark Clue* identifies intertextual echoes of both the Victorian novel *The Woman in White* and the neo-Victorian novel, *Possession*. 'A Brothel in Wapping,' rev. of *The Dark Clue*, by James Wilson, *TLS* 27 Apr. 2001: 22.

man's life by contemplating his work and the scarce physical remains he uncovers.

In both novels, as with *The Dark Clue*, the detection process is part of a biographical enterprise. These texts' engagement with detective fiction and biography asserts the parallels between the two modes and the extent to which all history is itself involved in a process of detection.<sup>57</sup> Biography, like detection, is based on the premise that there is a hidden secret at the core which, when recovered, will explain all the events.<sup>58</sup>

The mode of these texts' engagement with the conventions of detective fiction provides a means for conceptualising the nature of their relationship to Victorian fiction. *The Dark Clue's* engagement with the conventions of detective and sensation fiction takes the form of repetition with a difference; the text initially appears straightforwardly to adopt the Victorian forms of these genres but then signals its divergence from the Victorian modes by its incorporation of such elements as sexuality. This technique for engaging with Victorian fiction is characteristic of neo-Victorian fiction more generally and has important implications for determining the nature of the relationship between neo-Victorian texts and their Victorian predecessors. This approach has been remarked upon in relation to specific texts but there have been insufficient attempts to extend these accounts to a more general consideration of neo-Victorian fiction. To begin with, though, I will consider theoretical accounts of this technique that focus on individual instances.

Despite the minimal critical attention it has received, accounts of Palliser's *The Quincunx* provide the most sophisticated attempts to theorise this technique of

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<sup>57</sup> See Ray B. Browne and Lawrence A. Kreiser, Jr., eds., *The Detective as Historian: History and Art in Historical Crime Fiction* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State U Popular P, 2000).

<sup>58</sup> Richard D. Altick claims that nineteenth-century literary biography was premised on the assumption that the key to the art lay in the life, *Lives and Letters: A History of Literary Biography in England and America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969) 11.

repetition with a difference. Susan Onega, who has written two articles on Palliser's novel, claims that '[...] the quality that distinguishes *The Quincunx* is neither its capacity to imitate nor to parody Victorian fiction, but rather the hesitation between imitation and parody, order and chaos, realism-enhancing and realism-undermining effects characteristic of postmodernist fiction.'<sup>59</sup> Despite asserting it as the distinguishing feature of *The Quincunx*, Onega fails to present either a sustained account or convincing example of the operation of this hesitation within the narrative. Onega's description implies that there is no ultimate decision, that the text remains suspended between the two extremes of order and chaos, realism-enhancing and realism-undermining effects.<sup>60</sup> Onega's account is flawed since it implies that a decision is both possible and desirable and that the authors are either unable or reluctant to determine between the two possibilities. The relationship neo-Victorian fiction establishes with its Victorian predecessors, however, is more complex than Onega's account suggests and therefore the author's hesitancy is not an act of indecision or reluctance but rather a deliberate refusal to prioritise one term over the other. The neo-Victorian texts highlight both the continuities and discontinuities between the Victorian and contemporary forms of narrative by locating them within their specific historical context.

In an article also addressing the narrative strategy of Palliser's *The Quincunx* María Jesús Martínez conceptualises this technique as a two-step process of absorption followed by transformation. She explains this process by extending

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<sup>59</sup> Susan Onega, 'Mirror Games and Hidden Narratives in *The Quincunx*,' *Theme Parks, Rainforests and Sprouting Wastelands: European Essays on Theory and Performance in Contemporary British Fiction*, eds. Richard Todd and Luisa Flora (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 151-163, 151.

<sup>60</sup> Onega's confident assertion that she has grasped the only possible meaning of the final sentence of *The Quincunx* undermines her previous claim that the novel is characterised by hesitancy, 'Mirror Games', 158.



Kristeva's account of intertextuality saying 'If, as Kristeva [...] has put it, intertextuality involves not merely the absorption but also the transformation of (an)other text(s), the reader of *The Quincunx* is led to perceive first the absorption, and only that, and then the transformation.'<sup>61</sup> In contrast to Onega's account, in which two opposing tendencies coexist within a single narrative moment, Martínez conceives of these trends as operating consecutively and attempts to distinguish between them. Although Martínez's notion of absorption followed by transformation encapsulates the dual impulses present in neo-Victorian fiction her attempts to characterise this process as two distinct phases negates the sophisticated relationship these texts establish with the conventions of Victorian fiction. Moreover, it ignores the double relationship that neo-Victorian fiction establishes by merely focusing on the contemporary texts revision of the forms of their Victorian predecessors and not considering how neo-Victorian texts provide a means to explore the complexities within Victorian fiction.

Linda Hutcheon's theory of parody proves a more useful starting point for exploring the strategies adopted by neo-Victorian texts. Hutcheon asserts that 'Parody is a perfect postmodern form, in some senses, for it paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies.'<sup>62</sup> Although the notion of incorporating and challenging conventions is applicable to the processes of neo-Victorian fiction Hutcheon's definition retains too much of the traditional conception of parody, that its intention is to ironize and undermine that which is being parodied. She states that '[...] in postmodern parody [...] it is often ironic discontinuity that is

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<sup>61</sup> María Jesús Martínez, 'Narration-Parody-Intertextuality: Rewriting the Past in Charles Palliser's *The Quincunx*,' *Miscelánea: A Journal of English and American Studies* 18 (1997): 193-212, 203. Martínez's article is heavily indebted to Susan Onega's two articles on *The Quincunx*.

<sup>62</sup> Hutcheon, *Poetics*, 11.



revealed at the heart of continuity, difference at the heart of similarity.’<sup>63</sup> In neo-Victorian fiction, however, continuity is as often revealed at the heart of discontinuity, similarity at the heart of difference, but these continuities and discontinuities are also framed by an awareness of the distinct historical locations of the Victorian and neo-Victorian forms. Despite these reservations, one of the effects Hutcheon ascribes to parody is also evident within neo-Victorian fiction. She considers parody as a liberating stance which ‘forces a reconsideration of the idea of origin or originality [...].’<sup>64</sup> Neo-Victorian fiction similarly challenges the concepts of origin and originality in the double relationship that is established between these texts and their Victorian predecessors. In discussing neo-Victorian fiction it becomes apparent that contemporary fictional strategies should be considered in relation to their literary predecessors, in particular Victorian fiction. Moreover, neo-Victorian texts reveal that the perception of the “original” mode of Victorian fiction is based on a simplification of its complexities. They demonstrate how the very concept of “original” posits a teleological narrative which depends on the simplification of the earlier forms in order to present the later forms as developments upon them.

## Encounters with Realism

This double relationship, which takes the form of repetition with a difference, is evident in the dialogue these neo-Victorian texts construct with the conventions of Victorian realist fiction. With the exception of *The Dark Clue*, which is wholly narrated through first-person textual accounts, all the neo-Victorian texts adopt, at least to a certain extent, the conventions of the omniscient narrator so frequently

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<sup>63</sup> Hutcheon, *Poetics*, 11.

<sup>64</sup> Hutcheon, *Poetics*, 11.

employed in realist fiction. Although the invocation of the genres of sensation and detective fiction would appear to distance these texts from Victorian realism an implicit relationship is established as they challenge the prominence realism occupies in popular perceptions of Victorian literature. Moreover, the emergence of these genres in the nineteenth century should be understood in relation to Victorian realism. Victorian sensation fiction established a confrontational relationship with Victorian realism as the narrative authority of the realist narrator became untenable in sensation novels. According to Patrick Brantlinger, sensation fiction developed ‘new narrative strategies [...] to tantalise the reader by withholding information rather than divulging it’.<sup>65</sup> Such strategies marked a departure from the assumption of full narrative disclosure in realist fiction and thus undermined its claims to authority: ‘The forthright declarative statements of realistic fiction are, in a sense, now punctuated by question marks’.<sup>66</sup> Conversely, the detective novel, which is closely affiliated to and developed out of sensation fiction, depends upon the realist mode of narration to affect its resolution. In adopting the genre of detective fiction, Palliser’s *The Quincunx* implicitly engages with the processes of Victorian realist narration. In his ‘Author’s Afterword’ Palliser defines this process as an “implied contract” between author and reader which ‘assumes that everything to do with both plot and motivation is eventually explained in full by a narrator or author who is completely trustworthy – however much the reader might have been baffled and teased along the way’ (‘AA’, 1204). This contract is equally necessary in detective

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<sup>65</sup> Patrick Brantlinger, ‘What Is “Sensational” about the “Sensation Novel”?’, *Wilkie Collins*, ed. Lyn Pykett (London: Macmillan, 1998) 30-57, 30.

<sup>66</sup> Brantlinger, ‘What Is “Sensational” about the “Sensation Novel”?’, 30. See also Walter M. Kendrick’s essay ‘The Sensationalism of *The Woman in White*’, in which he claims that sensation fiction’s major impact ‘was the demonstration that novels could be successfully, even brilliantly written according to principles which seemed to contradict those of realism’. *Wilkie Collins*, ed. Lyn Pykett, 70-87, 70-71.

fiction in which the detective gradually explains the events and clues to the reader, until a full and complete account is achieved.<sup>67</sup>

Realism is such an important mode for neo-Victorian texts to engage with because the popular sense of Victorian literature is dominated by those “classic realist” texts that have entered the canon of great literature. Moreover, realism is often constructed as a naïve and simplistic form in opposition to the supposedly sophisticated forms of postmodern literature. As Harry E. Shaw notes in his reassessment of Victorian realism:

In commentary after commentary, the realist novel proves most useful as a foil, throwing into relief other, better forms and genres. Naïve where it should be subtle, confident because unreflective, realism has become the form which, far from showing the way past illusion, itself perpetuates the illusions on which our blind, ideology-ridden life in society depends.<sup>68</sup>

This reassessment of Victorian realism has been undertaken by several critics, as in George Levine’s seminal study *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley* (1981). Levine’s thesis counters the traditional conception of the Victorian novel as confidently and naively believing in the possibilities of realism, claiming that ‘Its massive self-confidence implied a radical doubt, its strategies of truth telling, a profound self-consciousness’.<sup>69</sup> Neo-Victorian fiction contributes to the reassessment of Victorian realism by asserting the historically specific conditions that produced it and rescuing it from diminishing popular conceptions of it.

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<sup>67</sup> This parallel between detective and realist fiction is explored further in Chapter 4.

<sup>68</sup> Harry E. Shaw, *Narrating Reality: Austen, Scott, Eliot* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1999) 3. See also accounts of realism in introductions to postmodernism such as Glen Ward *Postmodernism*. (London: Hodder Headline, 1997); and Christopher Butler, *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002).

<sup>69</sup> *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley* (Chicago & London: U of Chicago P, 1981) 15.

Despite this critical reassessment of Victorian realism, it retains its force as a naïve, traditional, and therefore comforting fictional mode in the popular imagination. Thus, whilst “high” literature is thought to have surpassed the constraints of realism, the form is still used unproblematically in much popular contemporary fiction, despite the differences in the cultural situations of the Victorian and our own eras. The dominance that realism commands over the literary scene is evident in the various strands of contemporary fiction that seek to disrupt and undermine its hegemony such as the magic realism of Angela Carter, the neo-realism of the post-war Italian novel and the surrealist movement. All these movements implicitly repudiate realism as inadequate for dealing with contemporary society.

Neo-Victorian texts are grounded in the specificity of the Victorian era they depict and so respond to the continuing presence of realism by highlighting its historical emergence. Moreover, in adopting the conventions of popular Victorian genres such as sensation and detective fiction, these texts seek to reposition the realist novel as one among many historically co-existent forms of fiction. The neo-Victorian texts self-consciously address the possibilities and limitations of realist narration and in doing so comment not merely on the forms of fictional narrative but also of historical narrative.<sup>70</sup> Whilst there have been many challenges to the hegemony of realism within the realm of fiction this experimentation has not been matched in the sphere of historiography, where realism remains the dominant mode

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<sup>70</sup> J. Hillis Miller argues that since certain assumptions about history ‘have been transferred to the traditional conception of the form of fiction’, ‘Insofar as a novel “deconstructs” the assumptions of “realism” in fiction, it also turns out to “deconstruct” naïve notions about history or about the writing of history’. ‘Narrative and History,’ *ELH* 41.3 (1974): 455-473; 459, 462.



of narration.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, the position of the historian resembles that of the realist narrator; both occupy a point in the future beyond the events they narrate, both strive to remove their personality from the narrative to become, in Ermarth's term, "nobody"; and, whilst aware of the arbitrariness of endings, both accept the necessity of imposing closure on their account. Harry Shaw implicitly associates realism with history in his assertion that 'the defining mark of the realism with which I am concerned is that it can be placed in a determinate positive relationship with historicism [...]. It responds to similar problems with similar tactics'.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, many contemporary biographies preserve the model of the nineteenth-century *bildungsroman*, a situation which could be seen as contributing to the fictional treatment of Victorian biographical forms in *The Biographer's Tale* and *The Dark Clue*.

The popular perception of the Victorian realist novel depends upon a presumption of the omniscience of the narrator. Yet Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth's account of the position of the narrator in realist fiction persuasively challenges the concept of omniscience. Avoiding the desire to ascribe the narrative perspective to an individual, Ermarth claims that the narrator is "nobody", neither individual nor corporeal, but rather 'a collective result, a specifier of consensus'.<sup>73</sup> What is usually claimed as omniscience should be conceived of as a collective consciousness. Accordingly, 'Its power of generalization belongs to any witness, to any implied spectator or reflexive consciousness at a certain distance. Such power is not a special

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<sup>71</sup> See Hayden White, 'The Burden of History,' *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1985), 27-50, 43-44.

<sup>72</sup> Shaw, 6.

<sup>73</sup> Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, *Realism and Consensus in the English Novel: Time, space and Narrative* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1998) 65-66.



privilege of the narrator but merely the condition of consciousness generally [...].<sup>74</sup> Ermarth's revaluation of the position of the realist narrator forestalls the accusation that in its omniscience a realist text is unrealistic since 'considered as a collective presence, the narrator's awareness is merely a potentiality of consciousness as derived from the various individual viewpoints that constitute it [...].'<sup>75</sup>

The most interesting texts in terms of their engagement with the conventions of realist narration are *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and *The Quincunx*. Fowles's novel not only interrogates the assumptions behind the mode of omniscient narration but also engages with modern theories of narrative. Immediately prior to the notorious frame-breaking Chapter 13, the narrator mocks the technique of omniscience which allows events to be narrated for which there are no witnesses: 'Later that night Sarah might have been seen – though I cannot think by whom, unless a passing owl – standing at the open window of her unlit bedroom' (*FL*, 83). The narrator also explicitly reflects upon the ethical nature of omniscience: 'But I am a novelist [...] – I can follow her where I like? But possibility is not permissibility' (*FL*, 85). Thus, the narrator challenges not only the viability of narratorial omniscience but also the ethics involved in such a position. Despite supposedly rejecting the conventions of omniscient narration, Fowles's narrator retains some of its privileges in narrating that Sarah was stood at her bedroom window. Moreover, the narrator transgresses the normal laws of time and space, appearing in the novel twice and putting his watch back in order to engineer the alternative ending. This intrusion of the narrator disrupts the illusion of reality which the fictional world is frequently at pains to establish and is usually considered as a consequence of the

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<sup>74</sup> Ermarth, *Realism and Consensus*, 67.

<sup>75</sup> Ermarth, *Realism and Consensus*, 71.

novel's postmodern status. Yet this feature has its precursors in Victorian realist novels.

George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) opens with the corporeal presence of the narrator leaning on a stone bridge surveying the scene at Dorlcote Mill. This opening chapter raises the problematic question of the status of the rest of the novel. The narrator reveals that 'I have been pressing my elbows on the arms of my chair and dreaming that I was standing on the bridge in front of Dorlcote Mill', which seems to suggest that the events of the novel are equally dreamt by the narrator.<sup>76</sup> Yet the narrator distinguishes this dreaming from the novel itself saying 'Before I dozed off, I was going to tell you what Mr and Mrs Tulliver were talking about [...] on that very afternoon I have been dreaming of.'<sup>77</sup> The narrator of Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1847) similarly raises these issues referring to himself as the "Manager of the Performance" and his characters as "puppets" whilst later claiming that the characters are "real" people who are acquaintances of the narrator.<sup>78</sup>

Fowles's narrator also questions and ultimately rejects modern theoretical conceptions of narrative, such as those of Barthes and Robbe-Grillet to whom he refers, saying that 'not even the most aleatory avant-garde modern novel has managed to extirpate its author completely' (*FL*, 86). Fowles's narrative technique depends upon exaggerated versions of both omniscient and avant-garde narrative modes. Indeed, the persistent assessment of Fowles's novel as an experimental and postmodernist text depends upon a simplification of Victorian literature as the

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<sup>76</sup> George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. and introd. A. S. Byatt (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979) 11.

<sup>77</sup> Eliot, *Mill on the Floss*, 11.

<sup>78</sup> William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair; Or, A Novel Without A Hero*, 1847, ed. and introd. John Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998) 2; 793.

features that are identified as “postmodern” were equally present in Victorian realist novels.

Although *The Quincunx* is mainly narrated through the first-person recollections of John and the characters he encounters there are several instances in which the narrative conventions of the third-person omniscient narrator, so often associated with Victorian realist fiction, appear to be adopted.<sup>79</sup> The opening chapter, which depicts an encounter between two figures simply designated Law and Equity, is one such instance. Yet the possibility that this is the omniscient narrator considered characteristic of Victorian realist fiction is undermined from the very outset. Rather than claiming to be presenting events as they happened the narrator indulges in speculation and thus undermines any sense of reliability: ‘It must have been late autumn of that year, and probably it was towards dusk [...]. Let us imagine, then, how Law might have waited upon Equity’ (*Q*, 3). Despite this, the narrator maintains some of the privileges of the omniscient narrator in accessing even the most restricted circles of society. In fact, even the first-person narrative of John retains some of the privileges of a third-person omniscient narrator as he recounts events of which he has no knowledge, in particular ‘the fate of those of my former companions whom I have been unable to find again’ (*Q*, 1178). This complex engagement with the conventions of realist narration highlights the popular misperceptions of those conventions.

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<sup>79</sup> Although Victorian novels also employed first-person narrators (for instance in *Great Expectations* and *Jane Eyre*) the omniscient third-person narrator is most commonly associated with Victorian realist fiction, see Martínez, ‘Narration-Parody-Intertextuality,’ 198. Martínez’s characterisation of the realist narrator as a ‘presiding consciousness, continuously present in the text [...] invariably defined by their privileged access to the story they narrate, their indiscreet inclusiveness and their lack of individual identity’ (198) is premised on a simplistic reading of Victorian fiction, as the discussion of Ermarth’s account of realism has shown.

It transpires throughout the course of the novel that the supposedly impersonal, omniscient, third-person narrator of the opening and several subsequent chapters is actually a character from the novel. Or, rather, two characters: the puppeteers Mr Pentecost and Mr Silverlight.<sup>80</sup> This revelation undermines the reader's confidence in the information provided by the puppeteers since as characters, rather than narrators, they are denied the privileged knowledge they professed to have. By revealing the supposedly external heterodiegetic narrator to be internal homodiegetic characters, Palliser implicitly questions the pretensions to omniscience of the realist narrator by demonstrating the fiction on which it depends.<sup>81</sup>

In nominating two Puppeteers as the narrators of his novel, Palliser recalls Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* in which the narrator is explicitly positioned as a puppeteer and the characters as puppets. Moreover, through this revelation Palliser explores the nature of the relationship between the narrator and characters in Victorian fiction.<sup>82</sup> Although the narrator of realist fiction is commonly conceived of as an impersonal and disembodied voice that merely observes the events, they often interact with the fictional characters they are describing. Thus, towards the end of Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* the narrator informs the reader that 'It was on this very tour that I, the present writer of a history of which every word is true, had the pleasure to see them [Amelia and Dobbin] first, and to make their acquaintance'.<sup>83</sup> Palliser's decision to have two characters narrate the supposedly impersonal sections of *The Quincunx* can be seen as similar to the claim made by Thackeray's narrator, Mr

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<sup>80</sup> Onega argues that it is possible to identify which of these sections are narrated by Mr Pentecost and which by Mr Silverlight, 'The Symbol Made Text,' 136. See also Martínez, 202, 205.

<sup>81</sup> As Martínez says, 'what can be more unreal than the figure of the omniscient narrator?', 203-04.

<sup>82</sup> See Onega, 'Symbol Made Text,' 139.

<sup>83</sup> Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, 793.



Pentecost and Mr Silverlight are narrating John's life-story as told to them by him. Similarly, in this light, the narrator's claim in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* to have purchased the Toby Jug that had belonged to Sarah, one of the fictional characters he invented, allies him more with the narrator of Victorian realist fiction than with the contemporary mode of narration practised by such figures as Robbe-Grillet. There is a difference between Fowles's and Thackeray's use of this device, however. Whilst the comment in *Vanity Fair* presents itself as evidence that the narrative being recounted is of true events, the narrator of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* declares that the figures are purely fictional creations. Yet in Thackeray's novel, the supposedly independent existence of the characters is undermined in the final sentence of the novel: 'Come, children, let us shut up the box and the puppets, for our play is played out'.<sup>84</sup> Similarly, despite proclaiming that 'These characters I create never existed outside my own mind' (*FL*, 85) the narrator of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* subsequently asserts that the characters possess free-will and so have an existence independent of their creator. The metafictional considerations of the relationship between fiction and reality in these two neo-Victorian texts are explicitly connected to similar instances in Victorian novels, and thus undermine the misperception that Victorian realist novels confidently assert the reality of their fictions.

In addition to the putatively omniscient third-person narration of the puppeteers, *The Quincunx* is told through a series of first-person narrations. The use of multiple narrators is often considered as evidence of the fragmentary, and therefore postmodern, nature of a text. Yet it should also be understood in relation to

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<sup>84</sup> Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, 878.



Victorian narrative conventions, especially since it is employed by Wilkie Collins in *The Woman in White*, an important intertext for Palliser's novel. In *The Woman in White* the multiple narratives are meant to resemble a court proceeding, supposedly combining to produce a full account of the events. As Walter Hartright states in the Preamble: '[...] the story here presented will be told by more than one pen, as the story of an offence against the laws is told in Court by more than one witness – with the same object, in both cases, to present the truth always in its most direct and most intelligible aspect [...]'<sup>85</sup>. Although Collins deploys this convention to defer the reader's discovery of pertinent information, it seems to eventually present a complete explanation of all the events. In postmodernist fiction the device of multiple narrators is often employed to destabilise the fiction of a coherent narrative. This is the case in *The Quincunx* as the conflicting narratives of the various characters, with their multiple inconsistencies and suppressions, serves to undermine the possibility of ever attaining a single, unified account of events. Yet Collins's narrative equally inscribes this impossibility as the textual accounts are used to deceive, most obviously in the inscription of Laura Fairlie's name on Anne Catherick's tombstone. Indeed, even at the narrative's close the possibility of distortion in the accounts is raised as Walter presents a selective version of events to the Fairlie's tenants: 'dwelling only upon the pecuniary motive [...] in order to avoid complicating my statement by unnecessary reference to Sir Percival's secret.'<sup>86</sup> Such a comment may provoke the reader to question Walter's motives in the rest of the account. As a sensation novel, then, Collins' narrative undermines the tenets of Victorian realism,

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<sup>85</sup> Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* 1860, ed. and introd. John Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996) 5.

<sup>86</sup> Collins, *Woman in White*, 634.

which are perceived as based on both the omniscience and the reliability of the narrator.

Another aspect of realist fiction with which these neo-Victorian texts engage is the conventions for closure. The common perception of Victorian realist novels is that they conclude with the neat resolution of all the loose ends of the plot, usually occasioned by a coincidence such as an inheritance from a previously unknown relative or a death. This belief in the fixed endings of Victorian fiction is a result of the misperception of Victorian omniscience, which is usually characterised as confidently presenting the world in its totality.<sup>87</sup> Henry James's well-known essay 'The Art of Fiction' laments readers' expectations that a good novel 'depends on a "happy ending", on a distribution at the last of prizes, pensions, husbands, wives, babies, millions, appended paragraphs, and cheerful remarks.'<sup>88</sup> Neo-Victorian texts self-consciously reflect upon and interrogate the possibilities provided for narrative closure within Victorian literary modes, locating them within their specific historical contexts. Yet these neo-Victorian texts do not simply replace the formalised endings of Victorian texts with inconclusive endings supposedly characteristic of postmodern fiction. Indeed, in their intertextual allusions to Victorian texts, they reveal the extent to which Victorian novels were self-consciously aware of and played with strategies for closure. Ermarth's account provides a more nuanced reading of the conventions for closure in Victorian realist fiction. She argues that 'Realism does not produce either a system with final closure or a system with complete open-endedness; the balancing between the two is itself a form, and a powerful assertion of

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<sup>87</sup> See Shaw, 9-10.

<sup>88</sup> Henry James, 'The Art of Fiction,' 1884 Rpt. in *The Critical Muse: Selected Literary Criticism*, ed. and introd. Roger Gard (London: Penguin, 1987): 186-206, 190.

mutual relevance that potentially extends to infinity and ends only arbitrarily'.<sup>89</sup>

Thus, whilst Victorian authors often do impose conventional and arbitrary conclusions on their texts they maintain a self-conscious awareness of, and indeed highlight to the reader, the conventional and arbitrary nature of the resolution. The complexities of Victorian endings will be considered in Chapter 3, with particular reference to *Villette*, *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Great Expectations*.

In their treatment of closure, these neo-Victorian texts engage with not only Victorian but also other neo-Victorian texts. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* provides the most prominent example of this in its intertextual link with the ending of Lodge's *Nice Work*. Lodge's novel self-consciously evokes Victorian conventions in its use of the inheritance device to resolve the plot. The twentieth-century plot of *Possession* is similarly resolved through this use of the inheritance convention although it is a literary rather than financial inheritance, since Maud is revealed to be the direct descendent of Ash and LaMotte and thus inherits their correspondence. Commenting on this intertextual relationship, Louise Yelin argues that Byatt transforms Lodge's ending by reversing its gender-coding.<sup>90</sup> Yelin's focus on the issue of gender causes her to overlook the significant aspect of Byatt's reversal, that it is a literary rather than financial inheritance, as well as both texts' relationship to the Victorian uses of this convention.

The self-conscious and realism-undermining effects of Fowles's text, and indeed of most neo-Victorian novels, are usually taken as confirmation of the postmodern status of these texts. Yet their engagement with the conventions of Victorian realism is more complex than the straightforward rejection or subversion

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<sup>89</sup> Ermarth, *Realism and Consensus*, 48.

<sup>90</sup> Louise Yelin, 'Cultural Cartography: A. S. Byatt's *Possession* and the Politics of Victorian Studies,' *Victorian Newsletter* 81 (1992 Spring), 38-41, 40.

these claims suggest. Neo-Victorian texts reveal certain continuities between the Victorian and contemporary modes of narration. The self-consciousness considered characteristic of postmodern fiction is revealed as present even in the supposedly “classic realist” texts of the Victorian era. Similarly, whilst inconclusiveness is considered a characteristic feature of postmodern fiction, these texts’ engagement with Victorian conventions for closure reveal the extent to which Victorian texts were themselves self-consciously aware of and involved in a metafictional process of questioning the strategies of closure. In engaging with the Victorian realist novel, neo-Victorian fictions reassert the historical context of these forms. This awareness of the historical specificity of these forms precludes both a simplistic adoption of the Victorian forms and the recuperation of these Victorian texts as proto-postmodernist. Rather it challenges the very categories of “Victorian” and “postmodern” literature.

### **A Moment in Time: The Importance of Historical Location**

One of the criticisms often levelled at historiographic metafiction is that in questioning the very possibility of historical knowledge the presentation of a specific historic period is prevented. For example, Huyssen declares that ‘The problem with postmodernism is that it relegates history to the dustbin of an obsolete episteme, arguing gleefully that the past does not exist except as text [...]’ consequently, ‘history is indeed up for grabs’.<sup>91</sup> Whilst questioning the accessibility of the past and the various modes in which it is narrated, neo-Victorian texts remain committed to recreating the historical specificity of the Victorian era they depict. Indeed, the very questioning of the possibilities of historical knowledge and its narrative forms are grounded in the specific historical context of the Victorian era. These texts’

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<sup>91</sup> Andreas Huyssen, ‘The Search for Tradition: Avant-Garde and Postmodernism in the 1970s,’ *New German Critique* 22 (1981): 23-40, 35.



interrogation of the various forms of fictional and historical narratives is specifically framed in relation to the Victorian forms of the narratives. In contrast to postmodern historical texts which seem to celebrate the fictional nature of history, neo-Victorian texts do assert the existence of a past that should be understood and recuperated responsibly. An imaginative engagement with the past must always be balanced by a commitment to its historical specificity.

One of the most important means by which these texts assert the existence of the past is through their deliberate reconstruction of specific moments in Victorian history. These texts do not simply draw on cultural perceptions of the Victorian era, which often conflate it with the nineteenth century, depicting an indefinable moment, the precise location of which is irrelevant. Rather they are located at precisely specified moments in the Victorian era and consider the impact of that moment on the narrative modes they engage with. Consequently, I resist an approach, such as that of Kucich and Sadoff, which incorporates discussions of Austen adaptations in an examination of neo-Victorian culture.<sup>92</sup> In examining these texts I preserve this commitment to the specificities of the Victorian context by incorporating Victorian responses to the fictional and historical narratives I discuss.

The opening paragraph of Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* precisely establishes the historical locale as 'one incisively sharp and blustery morning in the late March of 1867' (*FL*, 7). The incorporation of such seemingly irrelevant details as the month and weather is an effect of Fowles's initial adoption of the mode of realist narration. Yet the date is not chosen merely to render the text "realistic"; rather it has a deeper significance for the novel as it impacts upon the

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<sup>92</sup> Kucich and Sadoff, 'Introduction: Histories of the Present,' xi.



treatment of Darwinian and Marxist issues. This becomes even more apparent when the novel is considered alongside 'Morpho Eugenia' as Byatt's novella is set at the earlier point of the early 1860s and thus the attitudes towards Darwinism and Marxism displayed in the text differ from those in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Similarly, the different historical locations of *Possession* and 'The Conjugal Angel' affect their treatment of spiritualism.<sup>93</sup> The nineteenth-century elements of *Possession* occur in the late 1850s/early 1860s, when spiritualism was just beginning to emerge as a cultural phenomenon in England. In contrast, by the time of 'The Conjugal Angel', 1875, the British National Association of Spiritualists had been established in London and spiritualism had been accepted as a respectable pursuit.<sup>94</sup>

Although Wilson's *The Dark Clue* is narrated entirely through diaries and letters that bear precise calendar dates, the historical location of the novel remains vague since the year is omitted. The heading of a typical entry reads: 'From the journal of Walter Hartright, 13<sup>th</sup> October, 185-' (*DC*, 205). The reader is not left entirely in the dark, however, as the adoption of this convention, commonly used in Victorian and eighteenth-century fiction, alerts the reader to the decade in which it is set, if not the exact year. Moreover, the dates of '186-' prefixed to the postscript and the preamble provide a more precise sense of the location of the narrative, indicating that the action occurs towards the end of the 1850s. Whilst Wilson's novel does not overtly identify its historical location for the reader, it does instil a sense of historical

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<sup>93</sup> In his review of *Angels and Insects* Levenson noted the different historical locations of the two novellas, commenting that Byatt 'the precise Victorianist, knows that the brief period [between 'Morpho Eugenia' and 'The Conjugal Angel'] saw some large changes [...]'. Michael Levenson, 'The Religion of Fiction,' rev. of *Angels and Insects*, by A. S. Byatt, *New Republic* 209 (22 Aug 1993): 41-44, 43.

<sup>94</sup> See Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Nineteenth Century England* (London: Virago, 1989) 25, 8.

specificity in its incorporation of the dates of the composition of the letters and diaries, enabling the reader to follow the chronological movement of the narrative.

In contrast to the other texts, Palliser's novel is deliberately vague concerning its historical location. Whilst the narrator informs other characters of dates and his age he persistently fails to provide the reader with the same information, although there are often clues to assist the reader in deducing the information. This strategy has significant consequences for the novel and especially for its treatment of genealogy, most pertinently in regards to the date of John's birth.<sup>95</sup> Unlike in Wilson's novel, moreover, any clear sense of the chronological progression of the narrative events is denied to the reader since there are no clear indicators as to the temporal distance between the various events and the novel does not present a strictly chronological narrative.

Palliser's approach towards the historical location of the text is one of redundancy through excess, a strategy that is examined in more detail in Chapter 4. Basically, the text provides an abundance of precise historical details from which the reader can deduce the novel's historical location. Yet these details are often contradictory and so the identification of a specific year in which the action occurs is precluded. Despite this, Palliser's novel engages with the Victorian forms of detective and sensation fiction, particularly as they appeared in the novels of Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens.<sup>96</sup> Moreover, the treatment of genealogy in the novel is grounded in the specific state practices for identifying individuals that were implemented in the nineteenth century.

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<sup>95</sup> See Chapter 4.

<sup>96</sup> For accounts of *The Quincunx*'s intertextual echoes with the novels of Dickens and other Victorian authors see Martinez, 196; and Onega, 'Symbol Made Text', 132-3.

The incorporation of anachronistic references in these texts are generally deliberate and so do not necessarily undermine the specificity of the Victorian era they recreate. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the seemingly anachronistic references that proliferate in the opening chapters, such as the reference to the twentieth-century sculptor Henry Moore (*FL*, 7), actually alert the reader to the twentieth-century position occupied by the novel's narrator rather than undermine the historical picture of the Victorian era. In addition to the more specific anachronisms of historical details, historical fictions can also be anachronistic in terms of attitude and tone, a mode which is most interesting in these texts' treatment of sexuality. Our culture is generally regarded as being obsessed with sex and this is especially the case in many of the popular representations of the Victorian past. Television adaptations of Victorian texts often make explicit the sexual undertones of the Victorian source, or even invent sex scenes in order to appeal to a modern audience.<sup>97</sup> This approach of writing the sex back into Victorian fiction is similarly evident in fiction which treats of the Victorian era. Perhaps the most prominent examples of this fictional enterprise are the novels of Sarah Waters which portray a variety of "deviant" sexualities, especially lesbian relationships, in a Victorian context. This attempt to "sex up" the Victorians is not confined to the sphere of fiction and could be said to have originated with Steven Marcus's *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (1966).<sup>98</sup> The subtitle leaves no doubt as to the focus of Marcus's historical study, whilst the main title highlights his revisionist approach, which challenges the

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<sup>97</sup> For instance, as discussed in the Introduction, the recent BBC adaptation of Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* ended with Margaret Hale and John Thornton sharing a passionate kiss on a railway platform. *North and South*, by Elizabeth Gaskell, Adapt. Sandy Welch, BBC1.

<sup>98</sup> Steven Marcus. *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966).

cultural perception of the Victorians as repressed and prudish by revealing the other side of their culture.

Although Marcus's study predates it, Foucault's re-examination of the sexual repression hypothesis in *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction Vol. I* (1976) popularised this approach to the Victorians. According to the narrative constructed by the repressive hypothesis, at the beginning of the seventeenth century there was a certain frankness concerning sex but this was subsequently replaced by a determination to repress all things sexual. The narrative of the repression of sexuality is justified by its coincidence with the development of capitalism, which enables a retrospective explanation to be provided: '[...] if sex is so rigorously repressed, this is because it is incompatible with a general and intensive work imperative.'<sup>99</sup> This explanation implicitly validates the application of the sublimation theory to the Victorian era, which contends that its technological and scientific advances were a consequence of the channelling of repressed sexual energy. Foucault's narrative is a post-Freudian one in that it posits sexuality as both the primary cause and explanation of historical development. Since the Freudian narrative is perhaps the only grand narrative that remains more or less intact in the postmodern age it is unsurprising that so many neo-Victorian texts display an interest in the sexuality of their Victorian characters.<sup>100</sup>

Foucault hints at the purpose that the sexual repression hypothesis might serve in discussing the relationship between sex and power: 'If sex is repressed, that

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<sup>99</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol I: An Introduction*, 1976, trans. Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979) 6.

<sup>100</sup> Patrick Brantlinger asserts that 'the notion that sexuality is the "primum mobile" of history is a peculiarly modern, post-Freudian, [...] form of lopsidedness' and claims that this is the crux of Fowles's novel. Patrick Brantlinger, Ian Adam and Sheldon Rothblatt, 'The French Lieutenant's Woman: A Discussion,' *Victorian Studies* 15.3 (1972): 339-356, 341.



is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence,' he argues, 'then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression.'<sup>101</sup> Thus, the sexual repression hypothesis permits a teleological approach towards the past in constructing an opposition between repressed Victorians and liberated moderns. Even those texts that seek to reinstate the sexuality omitted from Victorian fiction depend upon this opposition for their effectiveness. For instance, Michel Faber's explicit descriptions of Sugar's sexual exploits in *The Crimson Petal and the White* are only transgressive because he perpetuates the stereotypical image of the repressed Victorian woman in Agnes.<sup>102</sup>

Whilst the neo-Victorian texts I am discussing do not engage in a simplistic process of "sexing up" the Victorians they are all concerned with issues of sexuality to a certain extent and so can be seen as responding to Foucault's rejection of the repressive hypothesis. This is particularly evident in John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, which was written at the end of the 1960s, a period characterised by sexual liberation and experimentation. Although the novel narrates the sexual encounters between Charles and Sarah, they are presented as transgressing the norms of Victorian society, as forerunners of a modern sensibility. Despite this presentation of Charles and Sarah as sexually liberated "moderns" trapped in a Victorian society, the narrator actually reverses the repressive hypothesis suggesting that the Victorians were more liberated than the moderns are. The narrator proposes another, more radical hypothesis:

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<sup>101</sup> Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 6.

<sup>102</sup> According to Weltman, this desire to preserve the image of the Victorians as sexually innocent, and so confirm the superiority of our modern attitudes, is also apparent in stage productions of Ruskin's life. Sharon Aronofsky Weltman, 'Victorians on Broadway at the Present Time: John Ruskin's Life on Stage' in *Functions of Victorian Culture at the Present Time*, ed. Christine L. Kreuger (Athens: Ohio UP, 2002), 79-94, 90.



it seems very far from sure that the Victorians did not experience a much keener, because less frequent, sexual pleasure than we do; and that they were not dimly aware of this, and so chose a convention of suppression, repression and silence to maintain the keenness of the pleasure (*FL*, 233-234).

Consequently, he reverses the repressive hypothesis arguing:

by transferring to the public imagination what they left to the private, we are the more Victorian – in the derogatory sense of the word – century, since we have, in destroying so much of the mystery, the difficulty, the aura of the forbidden, destroyed also a great deal of the pleasure (*FL*, 234).

Although Fowles's text is the only one of the neo-Victorian novels I am discussing that was written during the 1960s, it is possible to trace the influence of post-1960s thinking about sexuality in all of these texts. A similar reversal of the opposition between the repressed Victorians and liberated moderns is enacted in the dual plots of Byatt's *Possession*. In contrast to the Victorian lovers, the modern pair, Roland and Maud, appears the more repressed and emotionally reserved as they are unable to discuss love and sexuality except in terms of ideological constructs.<sup>103</sup> Interestingly, Roland is only able to engage in sexual intercourse with Val by imagining her as a Victorian woman, 'voluminously clothed, concealed in rustling silk and petticoats' (*P*, 126).

The texts that are set wholly in the nineteenth century do not overtly display such a teleological attitude towards the Victorians since they do not explicitly incorporate a modern, liberated example for comparison. Having said that, all four of these texts are concerned with sexuality; yet they do not merely engage in the process of "sexing up" the Victorians but rather address issues of sexuality in terms

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<sup>103</sup> This aspect of *Possession* is discussed in Hulbert, 'The Great Ventriloquist,' 56; and Donna Rifkind, 'Victorians' Secrets,' rev. of *Possession*, by A. S. Byatt, *The New Criterion* 9.6 (1991): 77-80, 79.

of their specific Victorian contexts. This interest in sexuality is signalled by neo-Victorian fiction's ventriloquism of the most intimate forms of textual accounts, diaries and letters. Diaries of nineteenth-century characters are one of the most frequently ventriloquised modes of discourse and, along with letters, recur throughout neo-Victorian fiction. Indeed, the entire narrative of Wilson's *The Dark Clue* is told through the letters and diaries of the Victorian characters. Whilst Wilson's adoption of this technique clearly alludes to the form of Collins's *The Woman in White* it is also part of this more general focus on letters and diaries within neo-Victorian fiction. In 'Morpho Eugenia' Byatt incorporates extracts from Adamson's diary, which recall Darwin's own record of his naturalist expedition *Voyage of the H.M.S. Beagle* (1845) and seem to be influenced by the same literature, particularly *Paradise Lost*.<sup>104</sup> Similarly, *The Quincunx* dedicates an entire book to Mary's diary, whilst *The French Lieutenant's Woman* incorporates examples of the central characters' letters.

The pervasiveness of letters and diaries within these neo-Victorian fictions suggests an explanation for the impulses that motivate such ventriloquisms of the past. In recreating diaries and letters of Victorian figures, whether they are historical or fictional, these novels seek to engage with the past at a personal and emotional level, they attempt to bring the past to life by allowing the characters to speak through their own voices. Most of the revelations disclosed in these diaries pertain to sexual desires and relationships and consequently they participate in the contemporary fascination with the Victorians' sex lives. *The Dark Clue* could be said to literally reinstate the sex that is omitted from Victorian fiction since it is a

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<sup>104</sup> 'Morpho Eugenia,' 12. Gillian Beer identifies Milton's epic poem as an influence for Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, (1983, London: Ark, 1985) 34-38.

sequel to Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* that narrates the sex lives of Collins's protagonists, Walter and Marian. Yet Wilson's depiction of the sex lives of these characters is intimately related to his treatment of biography and to Victorian debates concerning the "proper" sphere of investigation for a biographer. Similarly, the concern with sexuality in 'Morpho Eugenia' is explicitly connected to its consideration of Darwinian issues, whilst the treatment of illegitimacy and transgressive sexual relations in *The Quincunx* is intrinsically associated with Victorian anxieties over genealogy.

The treatment of sexual encounters in neo-Victorian fictions signifies their status as neo-Victorian rather than Victorian texts since their frank depiction is anachronistic for the nineteenth-century location in which they occur. The descriptions of Adamson's erection in 'Morpho Eugenia' as 'unmistakable stirrings and quickenings of bodily excitement in himself' ('ME', 6), and Pug's flatulence in 'The Conjugal Angel', are expressed in absurdly euphemistic terms. Whilst these descriptions may not seem authentically Victorian, especially in the case of the former which seems reminiscent of Mills and Boons literature, they represent an attempt to render topics which would have been taboo in respectable Victorian society in terms we would expect the Victorians to have used.<sup>105</sup> Although this is the most frequent form, the intrusion of contemporary sensibilities into these neo-Victorian fictions is not confined to their treatment of sexuality. In *The Quincunx* a character voices doubts over the validity of the boundary between sanity and insanity comparable to Foucault's theoretical pronouncements (*Q*, 766). As contemporary novels, neo-Victorian texts cannot wholly escape twentieth-century attitudes and

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<sup>105</sup> See Victoria Glendinning, 'Angels and ministers of graciousness', rev. of *Angels and Insects*, by A. S. Byatt. *The Times*, Saturday Review 7 Nov 1992: 45.

assumptions about the Victorian era. Indeed, Fowles admits that he deliberately conceded to them in his recreation of Victorian dialogue: ‘the genuine dialogue of 1867 (in so far as it can be heard in books of the time) is far too close to our own to sound convincingly old. It very often fails to agree with our psychological picture of the Victorians’.<sup>106</sup> Interestingly, Fowles appears to naively accept that the dialogue found in Victorian novels is ‘the genuine dialogue of 1867’; he rejects these contemporary fictions not because he considers them unreliable but because they do not conform to twentieth-century conceptions of the Victorians.

It is interesting that despite criticisms that contemporary historical fiction is not actually concerned with recreating the specificity and singularity of the past, these neo-Victorian texts are often condemned for attempting just that.<sup>107</sup> In his review of *The Quincunx*, Michael Bove censures Palliser’s incorporation of historically specific details: ‘Apparently sheer scholarly bulk has an aesthetic all its own as Palliser [...] rolls off thesis-quality descriptions of everything from turnpike-tollbooth architecture to 19<sup>th</sup>-century dishwashing techniques.’<sup>108</sup> Although Palliser’s aesthetic needs to be considered in relation to the incorporation of historical particularities, the ‘sheer scholarly bulk’ of references is not in itself problematic. Rather than merely criticising the inclusion of such details, I want to consider the means by which they are incorporated into the narrative. Palliser’s historical aesthetic is one of hyper-historicism, by which I mean that rather than validating the historical location of the narrative, the extent and nature of the

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<sup>106</sup> John Fowles, ‘Notes on an Unfinished Novel,’ *The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction*, Ed. Malcolm Bradbury, (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1977) 139

<sup>107</sup> Brantlinger claims that ‘Fowles’ narrator is so crammed with Victoriana that he verges on pedantry’, *The French Lieutenant’s Woman: A Discussion*, 339. Similar criticisms are made of the other texts; see for instance Hughes on *Angels and Insects*, ‘Repossession,’ 50; and Edworthy on *The Quincunx*, 19.

<sup>108</sup> Michael Bove, ‘*Delmonas* and *The Quincunx* proves aesthetics all their own,’ *The Tech*, 110.19 (April 1990): 8. Rev. of *The Quincunx*, by Charles Palliser, <http://www-tech.mit.edu/V110/N19/two.19a.html>

incorporation of extraneous historical details undermines the historical illusion the text attempts to create. *The Quincunx* does not incorporate a twentieth-century perspective but rather locates the entirety of its action in the nineteenth century and adopts a nineteenth-century style of narration. Thus, it could be argued that *The Quincunx* presents itself not as a historical novel but rather as a Victorian novel. Indeed, Palliser's motivation for writing the novel concurs with this: 'I might have first got the idea of actually embarking on something similar [to Victorian fiction] when I caught myself again and again looking along the shelves of bookshops for a new Dickens or Brontë or Hardy or Collins' ('AA', 1208). The aesthetic of hyper-historicism, however, undermines this illusion since it subtly signals the reader's historical distance from the narrative and thus the illusion of the novel as a nineteenth-century narrative is compromised. If *The Quincunx* was a Victorian text for a Victorian audience, the incorporation of such clarifying historical details as 'sovereigns and half-sovereigns had only been introduced a couple of years before' (*Q*, 89), would be unnecessary.

This question of the importance of historical specificity within historical fiction problematises Jameson's critique of postmodern historicism. The excessive incorporation of details pertaining to the fashions and manners of the past appears to render a narrative complicit with the process of recreating the styles of the past. Jameson contends that since we have lost the historical referent contemporary historical novels, of which he cites E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* as an example, 'can no longer set out to represent the historical past; it can only "represent" our ideas and stereotypes about that past [...].'<sup>109</sup> Yet the incorporation of specific historical

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<sup>109</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 25.



details can also be considered as part of an impulse to recuperate a specific historical referent, rather than merely the styles of the past. Moreover, the inclusion of excessive details is not a new development, as Jameson's association of it with postmodernism's loss of the historical referent suggests. A consideration of Victorian historical novels reveals that this tendency persisted throughout the Victorian era.

In his critical attack on the Victorian historical romance, Lewes identified two trends which correspond to Jameson's condemnations of the recuperation of the styles of the past and the incorporation of excessive details: 'The writers of this bastard species are of two kinds: the one kind has a mere surface-knowledge of history, picked up from other novels [...]. The other has "crammed" for the occasion: knows much, but knows it ill [...]'.<sup>110</sup> James Simmons claims that the excessive use of historical details in the historical novels of the 1830s and 1840s can be traced to the inception of the genre and Scott, 'who had himself always been susceptible to this excess.'<sup>111</sup> It appears to be more a feature of the historical novel generally rather than a response to the condition of history in postmodern culture. As I have argued throughout, the Victorian context of these texts impacts upon their status as historiographic metafiction and thus excuses them from the charge of merely recreating the styles of the past. Even *Palliser's* aesthetic of hyper-historicism, which undermines the illusion of the text as a nineteenth-century novel, can be seen as implicitly establishing the specificity of its historical referent by highlighting the historical distance between the reader and the narrative.

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<sup>110</sup> Lewes, 'Historical Romance', 35.

<sup>111</sup> Simmons, *The Novelist as Historian*, 13.

As the rest of this thesis will demonstrate, neo-Victorian fiction actively engages in a double relationship with Victorian fiction. It not only forces a reconsideration of the categories of literary history and the narratives of literary influence, but also challenges the concept of postmodernism by revealing the existence of supposedly postmodern features in Victorian texts. This is not to say that the Victorian texts are merely forerunners of postmodernism, nor that neo-Victorian fiction merely extends the possibilities that were never fully realized in Victorian literature. Rather my contention is that these novels prioritise an engagement with the specifically Victorian past and with the various historiographic modes for narrating that past. The subsequent chapters will examine the treatment of various historical narratives within neo-Victorian fiction. These texts reveal the continuities between the Victorian and contemporary forms, but they also demonstrate the discontinuities, the incompatibility between the Victorian forms of these historical narratives and the conditions of society in the postmodern age. By highlighting the specific historical circumstances that produced the narrative forms they engage with, they preclude a merely nostalgic recuperation of and return to the Victorian era. Consequently, the Victorian forms of these narratives are not prioritised over the modern forms but rather are examined within their specific historical context.

## Chapter Three

### Narrating the Past: Darwinian and Marxist Narratives

Neo-Victorian fiction encompasses contradictory impulses in its attitude towards the past. Although influenced by the postmodern approach of scepticism towards and interrogation of the narratives of history, neo-Victorian texts are more grounded in their historical locale and so retain a commitment to the historical specificity of the Victorian era they depict. The postmodern condition has been memorably characterised as one of ‘incredulity towards meta-narratives’ and several theorists of the postmodern revel in proclaiming the disappearance or death of dominant grand narratives, particularly that of history itself.<sup>1</sup> For Jameson, representations of the past are condemned merely to represent the styles of the past. Or, in Baudrillard’s more extreme formulation, it is no longer even possible to have representations; rather, they have been replaced by simulacra. Even postmodern historical fictions are unable to escape these criticisms. The numerous postmodern texts which seek to question and/or undermine the status of the narratives of history suggest that such assessments are indeed correct. These texts take two, often interrelated, approaches to the narratives of history: they either blur the boundaries between history and fiction, as in Graham Swift’s *Waterland* and Julian Barnes’s *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, or they reject the official narratives of history and seek instead to recuperate those histories suppressed by official versions, as in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. Although neo-Victorian fiction can take the form of

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Foreword by Frederic Jameson (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1987) xxiv. See also Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History?* (Washington: Irving Kristol, 1989); Jean Baudrillard, *Illusion of the End* trans. by Chris Turner (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994); Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism; Or, The cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991; 1993).

rewriting the narratives of history to incorporate those suppressed by the official narrative, the texts I focus on are not primarily interested in such a recuperation of the Victorian past. Their commitment to the specificity of the Victorian era forestalls attempts to recuperate Victorian narratives in our cultural relativist terms. Moreover, this commitment to the historical moment of the past prevents the extreme conclusion that history is as fictional as fiction.

Despite the pronouncements of such theorists, contemporary society remains preoccupied with structuring narratives. The proliferation of popular scientific works which claim to provide all-encompassing explanations reveal that, even if they are no longer needed, the question of what constitutes a structuring narrative has not yet been satisfactorily resolved.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Steven Connor claims that Lyotard's account of postmodernism itself constitutes a metanarrative; in theorising the so-called 'incredulity towards meta-narratives' Lyotard is constructing his own meta-narrative of postmodernism which 'names and correspondingly closes off the very world of cultural difference and plurality which it allegedly brings to visibility'.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the contemporary genre of historiographic metafiction can be considered not as a celebration of the fictional nature of history, but as an active inquiry, through fiction, into what constitutes history. Postmodern historical fiction is part of a more general questioning of the category of history. Whilst Jameson's critique remains true for some postmodern historical fictions it is unable to account for neo-Victorian fiction

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<sup>2</sup> The most famous examples are Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* (1988) and *The History of the World in a Nutshell* (2001). Conversely, there are numerous texts which provide the history of specific objects, such as Mark Kurlansky's *Cod: a Biography of the Fish That Changed the World* (1999); Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs and Steel: A Short History of Everybody for the Last 13,000 Years* (1998); and William H. McNeill's *Plagues and Peoples* (1976). These competing modes of history reveal that the nature of history remains unresolved in postmodern culture.

<sup>3</sup> Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to the Theories of the Contemporary* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999) 9.

since its interrogation of historical narratives occurs within a precisely specified historical locale.

The dual approach of neo-Victorian fiction is evident in its stance towards the structuring narratives of history: whilst interrogating the possibilities of narrating the past through such structuring narratives, they are also concerned with the particular narratives that emerged during the Victorian era. This chapter will examine the presentation of two such narratives, Marxism and Darwinism, in two neo-Victorian texts: John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) and A. S. Byatt's 'Morpho Eugenia' (1992). These texts are usually considered in relation to Darwinian theories of evolution, to the extent that Sally Shuttleworth categorises them as part of a subset of retro-Victorian fiction, 'the Victorian natural history novel'.<sup>4</sup> Yet it is not only the Darwinian narrative with which these texts are concerned. They should also be considered in relation to the narrative of Marxism, which structures history around the narrative of the emancipation of the workers.<sup>5</sup> The presentation of these structuring narratives demonstrates the dual impulses operating in neo-Victorian fiction. As historiographic metafiction, these texts explore the emergence of those narratives and their subsequent transformation into structuring narratives. Moreover, they also examine the narrative of history itself, most significantly through their disruption of the structuring narrative of literary history. The double relationship neo-Victorian texts construct with Victorian texts will be illuminated in this chapter through an examination of the intertextual links

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<sup>4</sup> Sally Shuttleworth, 'Natural History: The Retro-Victorian Novel', *The Third Culture: Literature and Science*, ed. Elinor S. Shaffer (New York: W. de Gruyter, 1998) 256.

<sup>5</sup> This element of the texts is usually overlooked by critics, with the exception of David W. Landrum, 'Rewriting Marx: Emancipation and Restoration in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*,' John Fowles, Ed. James R. Baker and Dianne Vipond. Spec. Issue of *Twentieth Century Literature: A Scholarly and critical Journal* 42.1 (1996): 103-113.



between the endings of these texts and the endings of Victorian texts. This double relationship reveals that the narrative of literary history adopts an evolutionary approach and undermines that narrative by challenging the categories of “Victorian” and “postmodern”. The opposition between chance and design that is explored throughout these texts, and especially in their endings, will be examined in light of the notions of design and chance within Darwinian and Marxian narratives.

The narratives of Darwin and Marx have become two of the most important structuring narratives of our time; they have lost the status of narratives and have become assumptions which inform our culture at the most fundamental level.<sup>6</sup> Speaking specifically of Darwin’s theories, Gillian Beer acknowledges that ‘evolutionary ideas are even more influential when they become assumptions embedded in the culture than while they are the subject of controversy’.<sup>7</sup> If we extend Beer’s observation to incorporate any structuring narrative, then it becomes possible to propose a counter-argument to Lyotard’s ‘incredulity towards meta-narratives’ hypothesis. It perhaps makes more sense to claim that it is not that we are incredulous towards structuring narratives in the postmodern era, but that those narratives have become so pervasive within our culture that it is almost impossible to delimit them.

As neo-Victorian fictions, these texts are keen to assert the historical specificity of the Darwinian and Marxist narratives they engage with. Indeed, the specific historical moment in which the texts’ action is located highlights the

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<sup>6</sup> See Francis Wheen’s *Karl Marx* which asserts that ‘The history of the twentieth century is Marx’s legacy’ (1991. London: Fourth Estate, 2000) 1. Although Marxism could be considered a failed grand narrative in that Marx’s predictions about revolution have been proved wrong, his theories still have a widespread impact on our society, to the extent that it is almost impossible to discuss class in anything other than Marxist terms.

<sup>7</sup> Gillian Beer, *Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (1983. London: Ark Paperbacks, 1985) 4.

importance of the Darwinian and Marxist narratives. Both ‘Morpho Eugenia’ and *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* are set in the years after the publication of Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859), when the initial fervour had almost disappeared and Darwin’s ideas were beginning to become a more widespread cultural assumption.<sup>8</sup> The historical location of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* also signals the novel’s interest in Marx’s narrative. In the opening paragraph the precise historical moment of the novel’s action is identified as ‘the late March of 1867’ (*FL*, 7), the significance of which is subsequently revealed to the reader. After discussing Charles’s attitude towards the possibility of revolution in England, the narrator remarks: ‘Needless to say, Charles knew nothing of the beavered German Jew quietly working, as it so happened, that very afternoon in the British Museum library’ (*FL*, 16). Indeed, as we are later told, ‘in only six months from this March of 1867, the first volume of *Kapital* was to appear in Hamburg’ (*FL*, 16). The chapter in which these references occur is prefaced by an epigraph from Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*, highlighting the inseparability of Marxism and Darwinism within the novel. Retaining a commitment to the historical specificity of her narrative, Byatt does not incorporate any explicit references to Marxism within her novella, since its action is located prior to the publication of *Capital*. Yet the interrelationship of Marxist and Darwinian concepts within these texts is not just a consequence of their historical contemporaneity; rather, as I will show, the theories were the product of the same intellectual climate and share some of the cultural preoccupations of the nineteenth century. In order to elucidate these connections I will first consider these structuring

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<sup>8</sup> For an account of the different phases of response to *On the Origin of Species* see Alvar Ellegård, *Darwin and the General Reader: The Reception of Darwin’s Theory of Evolution in the British Periodical Press, 1859-1872* (Göteborg: Elanders Boktryckeri Aktiebolag, 1958).

narratives in the specific moment of their historical emergence before exploring their interrelations within the neo-Victorian texts of Fowles and Byatt.

### **The Nineteenth-Century Context of Darwin and Marx**

The historical circumstances surrounding the emergence of the Darwinian narrative of evolution undermines the structuring narrative of history based on a “great man” approach. Rather, Darwin’s theory is revealed as a product of a complex web of interrelations. Such an approach rejects the “great man” theory of history in favour of a history of ideas approach, which considers Darwin’s theory not as a paradigm shift but rather a consequence of successive, smaller, barely perceptible, shifts in ways of perceiving the world.<sup>9</sup> Although such an approach would seem to correspond to the postmodern rejection of structuring narratives, there is still a tendency to posit Darwin as the originary figure of the theory of evolution. Darwin’s narrative occupies an interesting position in contemporary society. On the one hand it has become so pervasive that it is no longer tied to the individual who developed it and is taught in schools as merely the theory of evolution, or often not even as a “theory”. Conversely, there is a current fascination with the figure of Darwin himself and a desire to assert his status as a great figure, illustrated by the results of the BBC Great Britons debate in which Darwin was voted fourth.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Darwin’s name has become synonymous with the theory of evolution rather than just with the notion of natural selection which he developed. Thus, history is still told via the “great man” approach in which the story of an exceptional individual provides the over-arching framework for the narrative.

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<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, this approach resembles that taken by Lyell in his theory of geological development.

<sup>10</sup> The BBC Great Britons Debate was held in Nov. 2002.

Darwin's theory of evolution developed the existing theories forwarded in Erasmus Darwin's *Zoonomia* (1794-1796), Paley's *Natural Theology* (1802) and Lamarck's *Philosophie Zoologique* (1809). Darwin inherited the notion of evolutionary development from such theorists but diverged on the question of the cause of evolution, positing a process of natural selection instead of a belief in successive acts of creation such as Paley had contended. The theory of gradual evolution through successive generations propounded by Darwin was only conceivable in a world with an immeasurable history, such as was proposed by Charles Lyell in his *Principles on Geology*, published in three volumes between 1830 and 1833. Darwin's ideas were also influenced by developments in other branches of scientific knowledge, the best documented of which is the impact of Thomas Malthus's economic theory. Darwin is known to have read and been affected by Malthus's *On the Principle of Population As It Affects the Future Improvement of Society* (1798) and the Malthusian influence is apparent in Darwin's terminology: 'Hence we may confidently assert, that all plants and animals are tending to increase at a geometrical ratio, that all would most rapidly stock every station in which they could any how exist, and that the geometrical tendency to increase must be checked by destruction at some period of life'.<sup>11</sup> This relationship between Darwin's naturalist theory and Malthus's economic theory prefigures the connection of Darwinism and Marxism since Marx was also responding to the theories of Malthus.

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<sup>11</sup> Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species: A Facsimile of the first Edition*, Introd. Ernst Mayr (1859; Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1964) 65. The connection to Malthus is traced in most considerations of the context of Darwin's thought but see especially Ted Benton, 'Science, Ideology and Culture: Malthus and *The Origin of Species*,' *Charles Darwin's The Origin of Species: New Interdisciplinary Essays* ed. David Amigoni and Jeff Wallace (Manchester, New York: Manchester UP, 1995) 68-94.

Although Darwin's theory extended and relied upon previous scientific concepts it still provoked huge controversy when it was initially published. In his study *Darwin and the General Reader* (1958), Alvar Ellegård traces the various responses to Darwin's theories in Victorian culture, positing three sub-periods, during which the response fluctuated greatly.<sup>12</sup> Darwin's theory challenged the dominant narratives of the Victorian era, most obviously the religious narratives of the time and indeed Darwin's theories met with strong objection from many religious figures. The most famous of these objections was mounted by Samuel Wilberforce, Bishop of Oxford, at a meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science held at Oxford University in June 1860.<sup>13</sup> The church had two main objections to Darwin's theories. First, it undermined James Usher's account, calculated from biblical evidence, that the earth was only 4,000 years old. This was not such a transgression since Usher's theories had already been challenged by Lyell's geological dating of the earth's formation, which Darwin merely adopted for his own theory. The most contentious issue however was the role played by God in Darwin's account. According to biblical accounts, God created the world in six days, filling it with all the varieties of creatures now in existence. Consequently evolution did not occur since all the species had been produced by a single act of creation and had been created in the perfect form in which they now existed. Darwin's theory not only proposed that it was a more gradual process than this single act of creation allowed for, but also that there was no creator behind the adaptations, merely chance.

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<sup>12</sup> Ellegård, *Darwin and the General Reader*, 27-28.

<sup>13</sup> For an account of this event see J. R. Lucas, 'Wilberforce and Huxley: A Legendary Encounter,' *The Historical Journal* 22.2 (1979): 313-30.



Darwin's theory was intended to be as neutral as possible, to suggest a selection process that did not involve a selector. In his theory, the species which survives is that which is best adapted to the particular circumstances of the time; it is not necessarily a superior species. If the environment changes then the species may no longer be the fittest and so will be replaced. Despite this, Darwin's theory was recuperated by the Victorians into their ideology of Progress.<sup>14</sup> This recuperation of Darwin's theory was often used as justification for the belief in racial superiority necessary to sustain the Empire as well as the class system in Britain. Yet Marx believed that Darwin's theory actually provided support for his own revolutionary attitude towards the class system. Writing to Engels of *On the Origin of Species*, Marx commented that 'this is the book which contains the basis in natural history for our view'.<sup>15</sup> A Marxist recuperation of Darwin's theory would argue that the proletariat are the class fittest to rule and that the material conditions of their exploitation will cause them to adapt and develop the revolutionary consciousness necessary to bring about the communist state.

Darwin's search for the origin of species coincided with a preoccupation with linguistic origins. Although this interest in linguistic origins predates the nineteenth century it intensified in that period with the rise of comparative philology, which sought to re-construct the original language of the early indo-Europeans, and its recognition as a science.<sup>16</sup> This project can be aligned with the anthropological investigations of the mid-Victorian era which sought to "find" primitive

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<sup>14</sup> As Leo Henkin notes 'In the Victorian age, an age of prosperity and self-complacency, it was inevitable that an optimistic interpretation of evolution should be readily received', *Darwinism in the English Novel 1860-1910: The Impact of Evolution on Victorian Fiction* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963) 198.

<sup>15</sup> Letter from Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels 19 Dec 1860, quoted in Wheen, *Karl Marx*, 364.

<sup>16</sup> See Roy Harris and Talbot J. Taylor, *Landmarks in Linguistic Thought 1: The Western Tradition from Socrates to Saussure* 2nd Ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 1997) xx.

communities, untainted by progression and civilisation; the original *Homo sapiens* community from which man had developed into the “civilised” Victorian. Indeed, the evolutionary bias evident in such a project also underpins the search for linguistic origins since it provided justification for the superiority of a particular nation.

Darwin was clearly aware of this intellectual context and indeed often employed linguistic examples to explain his point. Thus, he draws an analogy between a breed in the natural world and a dialect within the linguistic world, neither of which, he claims, have a definite origin.<sup>17</sup> The most powerful, and oft-quoted, example of this is the metaphorical connection he makes between the geological record and a history book: ‘[...] of this history we possess the last volume alone, relating only to two or three countries. Of this volume, only here and there a short chapter has been preserved; and of each page, only here and there a few lines’.<sup>18</sup> Darwin’s lament highlights an important distinction between his approach and that of the linguists and anthropologists. Whilst the linguists and anthropologists believed that it was possible to recover the “lost” origins of language or human civilisation, Darwin, despite the title of his book, denied that possibility. Moreover, the diagram Darwin incorporates into his text resembles those used by historians of language and classification systems.<sup>19</sup> Thus, Darwin’s theory should be understood in relation to the developments in linguistics during the nineteenth century. As Harris and Taylor

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<sup>17</sup> Darwin, *Origin*, 40.

<sup>18</sup> Darwin, *Origin* 310-311.

<sup>19</sup> See Harriet Ritvo, ‘Classification and Continuity in *The Origin of Species*’ *Charles Darwin’s The Origin of Species: New Interdisciplinary Essays* ed. David Amigoni and Jeff Wallace (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1995): 47-67.

comment, 'Evolutionary thinking in linguistics was supported by, and itself supported, the acceptance of Darwin's ideas in biology'.<sup>20</sup>

Marx's theory of the structure of class relations developed out of the same cultural climate as Darwin's theory of evolution. Marx identified three stages of society, categorised according to the dominant mode of production as Feudalism, Capitalism and Communism. Marx believed that these stages occurred in succession and that all countries would eventually conform to this model by moving from Capitalism to Communism. This model presents a progressive ideology as Marx believed that the final stage of Communism is the perfect state since it is the stage in which the proletariat would have power. In contrast to Darwin's theory, then, Marx's ideas presupposed an order and design to the universe. Whilst Darwin's theory removes agency from the process of evolution, Marx's theory depends upon it, despite the belief that development would follow a pre-determined design. According to Marx, the final stage of Communism will only be brought about through an act of revolution by the proletariat; society will only progress to the communist state when the proletariat develop a revolutionary consciousness. This transformation can only be achieved if the proletariat adapt but, contrary to Darwin's model, this adaptation is not meant to make them better suited to the environment, which would merely result in them being co-opted into the capitalist system. Rather they need to develop a class consciousness which is opposed to the prevailing class system of capitalism and thus will prompt them to transform that system. Thus, for Marx, adaptation is a conscious, willed process rather than a result of random

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<sup>20</sup> Harris and Taylor, xx-xxi. Darwin's diagram also resembles genealogical trees, unsurprisingly since Darwin claims that the natural system is genealogical in arrangement, *Origin*, 422. This connection is interesting in light of the anxiety Darwin's theory prompted over genealogy, an aspect of Victorian culture that is considered in Chapter 4 in relation to Charles Palliser's *The Quincunx*.

transformations; it is in this sense closer to the Lamarckian model of evolution than to Darwin's.

### **Darwinian and Marxist Narratives in Neo-Victorian Fictions**

Since it is impossible to trace discrete narratives, these narratives should be conceptualised more as a nexus of ideas which interact with and permeate each other; thus the separation of the Marxist and Darwinian concerns within the neo-Victorian texts is impractical. As I have demonstrated, the historical location of both texts places them within the context of Darwin's theories of evolution, and in the case of Fowles' text highlights the concern with Marxism. Moreover, Fowles incorporates numerous epigraphs both from Marx's own writings and various sources concerned with class issues. Indeed, the epigraph to the whole novel is also taken from Marx's writings, *Zur Judefrage*: 'Every emancipation is a restoration of the human world and of human relationships to man himself', revealing the text's concern with both Marxism and the twentieth-century philosophy most connected with the issue of freedom, existentialism. Conversely, 'Morpho Eugenia' is not as overtly concerned with Marxism since the majority of the text's action occurs prior to the publication of Marx's text. Whilst Byatt is clearly aware of the subsequent developments in Victorian culture, her decision to present a Victorian narrative without a twentieth-century frame precludes any explicit consideration of Marxism within the text. Yet Marxist elements are implicitly present in the novel and focusing on these provides an interesting alternative to Shuttleworth's designation of Byatt's text as a Victorian natural history novel. That Marxist ideas are implicitly evoked in the novella is most apparent in the analogies between the insect communities and Bredely Hall that are continually advanced. As with *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the Marxist



elements of this text cannot be considered in isolation from its Darwinian context.

Adamson's observations on the communities of both the insect world and Bredely Hall are made from his position as an outsider from both communities, a position that is a consequence of his profession and which, in the Bredely Hall community, is overlaid with class implications.

The interrelations of Darwinian and Marxist concerns within these texts are best elucidated in relation to their protagonists since both texts adopt protagonists who actively engage with Darwin's ideas. The naturalist protagonist of 'Morpho Eugenia', William Adamson is involved in the process of classifying the natural world, a role that is reinforced by the allusion in his surname. 'Adamson' is literally the son of Adam, the first man on earth, whose task it was to name all the other creatures in the Garden of Eden, thus forging connections between the natural world and language.<sup>21</sup> The numerous references to *Paradise Lost* in 'Morpho Eugenia' would alert a knowing reader to the connection between Adamson and Darwin since Darwin is known to have taken *Paradise Lost* on his voyages and is believed to have been significantly influenced by it.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, it foregrounds the association between language and the natural world. In his epic, Milton depicts the primary scene in the Garden of Eden when Adam grants names to all the living creatures: 'I named them, as they passed, and understood / Their nature, with such knowledge God endued / My sudden apprehension [...]'.<sup>23</sup> Although the names are ascribed to the animals by a human mind they are not presented as arbitrary but rather as

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<sup>21</sup> Byatt states that 'I called my hero Adamson because one of his activities [...] was giving human names and attributes to new forms of life in that ambiguous Paradise or Green Hell, the Amazon' 'Introduction' to *Angels and Insects*, <http://www.asbyatt.com/anglInsect.htm>.

<sup>22</sup> See Beer, *Darwin's Plots*, 34-38.

<sup>23</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 1674. *John Milton Paradise Lost: An Authoritative Text Backgrounds and Sources Criticism* Ed. Scott Elledge (New York, London: W. W. Norton & company, 1975): Book VIII l.352-354.



conforming to a preconceived pattern; the name which Adam assigns is the true and only possible name since it reflects their nature. This notion of an originary language which exists in perfect harmony with the natural world is the opposite of Darwin's approach. Darwin's title implies that he is keen to ascertain the origin of all species yet he never does this. Instead, he argues that the categories of species are not useful but rather 'merely artificial combinations made for convenience', and therefore like language.<sup>24</sup> Thus, Darwin's project recognises the futility of a search for origins and asserts the arbitrary relationship between language and the natural world.

In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the protagonist's affinity with Darwinism is similarly indicated through his names. Charles Smithson shares a Christian name not only with Darwin himself but also with the geologist who provided the time-scale necessary for Darwin's theories, Lyell. Moreover, his surname is that of the benefactor of the natural history museum in America, 'The Smithsonian'.<sup>25</sup> These allusions serve as an indicator of Charles's multiple interests: his predilections for Darwin's theory of evolution, Lyell's theory of the geological development of the earth and collecting coalesce in his amateur investigations into palaeontology.

Whilst the protagonists of these texts clearly share an interest in Darwinian issues there are two distinctions to be made between William Adamson and Charles Smithson which have consequences for the novel's wider approach to Darwinism. The first of these distinctions highlights the inseparability of Darwinism and Marxism within these texts. William Adamson is a professional naturalist, his

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<sup>24</sup> Darwin, *Origin* 485.

<sup>25</sup> See Kevin Padian, 'Deep Time, Evolutionary Legacy, and the Darwinian Landscape in John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*,' *John Fowles and Nature: Fourteen Perspectives on Landscape* ed. James R. Aubrey (London: Associated U Presses, 1999) 154-168; 154.

reliance on his scientific capabilities to earn a living is emphasised by his embarrassing financial position at the opening of the novel. For William, his naturalist pursuits are not only a passion but a vocation. This is contrasted to Harald Alabaster whose interest in the natural world, as an aristocrat, never extends beyond that of the amateur. Whilst not given to naturalist expeditions himself, Harald's wealth enables him to accrue a vast collection of specimens from such journeys. The relationship between Alabaster and Adamson replicates the class structure in England with Alabaster representing the leisured classes who reap the fruits of the proletariat Adamson's labour. Fowles's protagonist, Charles Smithson, resembles Alabaster more closely than he does Adamson. Although Charles does undertake expeditions himself, such as the one to Lyme Regis, his interest in palaeontology is clearly that of an amateur. In fact, his interest is a diversion, necessitated by the position he occupies as a member of the aristocracy, providing at least a partial solution to the problem of 'spinning out what one did to occupy the vast colonnades of leisure available' (*FL*, 16).

The social gulf that exists between Adamson on the one hand and Alabaster and Smithson on the other also exists between Adamson and Darwin himself. Whilst clearly not an amateur in terms of his enthusiasm and dedication to his scientific pursuits, Darwin was also not a professional scientist in the way that Adamson is since he did not undertake his expeditions for financial purposes. The second distinction between William and Charles concerns the scientific disciplines through which they pursue their interest in Darwinism. Although this has already been alluded to it needs to be explicitly foregrounded that whilst William, like Darwin

himself, is a naturalist, Charles is a palaeontologist.<sup>26</sup> Charles's interest in palaeontology could be seen as a comment on his class position since he belongs to the aristocratic class whose privileged position in society was being threatened to the point of possible extinction. The threat Darwin's evolutionary theory poses to Charles's existence is reflected in the narrator's dismissal of him as a 'poor living fossil' (*FL*, 253). Charles himself begins to recognise this association when he likens himself to a hedgehog, 'an animal whose only means of defence was to lie as if dead and erect its prickles, its aristocratic sensibilities' (*FL*, 254). Whilst Charles's interests lie in dead fossils, we are told that Adamson 'wanted to observe *life*, not dead shells, he wanted to know the processes of living things' ('ME', 73). Again, this relates to Adamson's class position since he represents the rising professional classes that were gaining social responsibility and political power at this time. Ironically, whereas Charles's interest in palaeontology is overpowered by the living in the form of Sarah, Adamson remains entirely unobservant of the people around him, especially his wife and children, despite his professional vocation.

The generational conflicts enacted within these texts should also be positioned in relation to the Marxist and Darwinian contexts. In 'Morpho Eugenia' the generational conflict is staged between the religious Harald Alabaster, who attempts to reconcile Darwinian theories to his belief in a creator, and William Adamson, who wholeheartedly accepts Darwin's theories and consequently rejects such religious comforts. Similarly, the generational conflict between Charles and Mr Freeman in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* centres on their differing attitudes

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<sup>26</sup> In her consideration of these two texts Shuttleworth refers to Adamson as 'a naturalist and follower of Darwin [...]' whilst Smithson is described as 'an amateur naturalist and follower of Darwin', 254; 256. Although she correctly identifies the distinction between the professional and amateur, her ascription of the term 'naturalist' to Charles ignores the second distinction I propose.

towards Darwinism. In both cases, however, there are also undertones of class anxiety. In 'Morpho Eugenia' Adamson, a member of the professional class, adapts to the current environment by accepting Darwinism whilst the aristocratic Alabaster is seen as a relic of a dying age in his refusal to abandon his out-dated belief systems. Although class is also an important undercurrent in the conflict between Charles and Mr Freeman the roles are reversed; it is the aristocratic Charles who accepts Darwin's propositions whilst the bourgeois Mr Freeman, himself a shining exemplar of the principle of survival of the fittest, remains hostile. The interrelationship of Marxist and Darwinian concerns in this conflict is evident in Charles's recounting of the debate between himself and Mr Freeman. Charles informs Ernestina "He did say that he would not let his daughter marry a man who considered his grandfather to be an ape. But I think on reflection he will recall that in my case it was a titled ape" (*FL*, 11).<sup>27</sup> The cause of these conflicts recalls that depicted in Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son* (1907), which narrates the rupture of Gosse's relationship with his father occasioned by the opposition between his belief in Darwin's theories and his father's religious convictions.<sup>28</sup> Whilst these conflicts are staged between father-in-law and son-in-law they clearly represent a variation on the narrative of Gosse. Indeed, Harald Alabaster can be seen as not only a father-in-law to William but also as a surrogate for the father from whom he is completely cut off as a consequence of his scientific views.

The portrayal of such generational conflicts is also a condition of these texts' status as neo-Victorian fictions. The generational conflict within these texts replicates the relationship between neo-Victorian and Victorian texts. Yet these

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<sup>27</sup> This exchange obviously alludes to the infamous encounter between Huxley and Wilberforce.

<sup>28</sup> Edmund Gosse, *Father and Son* (1907; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972).

authors do not merely reject their Victorian inheritance; rather they engage with Victorian fiction in a more complex and sophisticated way, establishing what I have identified as a double relationship. This double relationship involves a negotiation with Victorian literature in order to continue some of its forms whilst simultaneously extending and transforming others. This negotiation of a relationship with our Victorian ancestors will be explicitly addressed in terms of the presentation of endings in these texts.

Considerations of Darwinism in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* usually concentrate on Sarah Woodruff's role within the novel, with the majority of reviewers concurring that Sarah is a precursor of the modern subjectivity prevalent in twentieth-century society.<sup>29</sup> In this respect, Sarah is interpreted as the cultural "missing link" between the Victorians and the moderns. The novel presents an evolutionist attitude which depicts the emergence of the postmodern subject as an inevitable result of the process of natural selection. Adopting Darwinian metaphors, the narrator claims that 'what dies is the form. The matter is immortal' and 'We can trace the Victorian gentleman's best qualities back to the parfit knights and the *preux chevaliers* of the Middle Ages; and trace them forward into the modern gentleman, that breed we call scientists [...]' (FL, 256).

In a similar vein, Sam is depicted 'like some modern working-class man who thinks a keen knowledge of cars a sign of his social progress' (FL, 41). Indeed, by the end of the novel Sam and Mary have evolved from their position as domestic servants to become lower-middle-class subjects who themselves employ a servant.

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<sup>29</sup> See Tony E. Jackson, 'Charles and the Hopeful Monster: Postmodern Evolutionary Theory in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*,' *Twentieth Century Literature* 43.2 (1997): 221-242; Barry N. Olshen, *John Fowles* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1978) 65; and Thomas C. Foster, *Understanding John Fowles* (Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 1994) 77-78.



Fowles's portrayal of the working classes is explicitly distanced from the stereotypical images associated with Victorian fiction. The reader is introduced to Charles's manservant Sam by way of comparison to one of Dickens's creations: 'Of course to us any Cockney servant called Sam evokes immediately the immortal Weller; and it was certainly from that background that this Sam had emerged. But thirty years had passed since *Pickwick Papers* first coruscated into the world' (*FL*, 41). Thus the narrator makes the reader aware of the stereotype only to differentiate Sam from it. Indeed, the major distinction between these two figures is cast as a difference in historical situation: '[...] the difference between Sam Weller and Sam Farrow (that is, between 1836 and 1867) was this: the first was happy with his role, the second suffered it' (*FL*, 42). This distinction relates to the Marxist narrative in the novel since it implies that the emergence of a class consciousness is the inevitable result of historical development. It also suggests that for humans to evolve they need to adopt a historical perspective that enables them to perceive how far they have progressed. In Marxist terms, however, these two figures have failed to develop the class consciousness necessary to achieve the proletarian revolution; instead they have been co-opted into the capitalist system, replicating its injustices by employing a servant.<sup>30</sup>

The trajectory of these characters represents not only the evolution of the individual but also that of the type they represent. Sarah evolves from the oppressed Victorian governess to the sexually liberated, independent woman and Sam evolves from a member of the serving-class to a socially aspirant member of the lower-middle class. Charles is the only character who does not accomplish his evolution in

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<sup>30</sup> See Landrum, 'Rewriting Marx'.

the course of the novel, although there are suggestions that the process has at least begun since he recognises that the aristocratic class is a dying species.

‘Morpho Eugenia’ does not present such particularised portraits of the working classes as those of Sam and Mary in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*. This could be a consequence of Adamson’s position as a naturalist, which causes him to draw analogies between the ant communities he studies and that of Bredely Hall. In naturalist terms, the ant workers, and the servants, only exist in terms of their function within the community and thus do not possess an individualised sense of identity. Despite occupying an uncertain position in relation to the class structure of the household, Adamson betrays a sense of class superiority in his denial of the individual identities of the servants. The domestic servants in ‘Morpho Eugenia’ are frequently portrayed as silent, motionless figures and are seldom individualised.

Although neither ‘Morpho Eugenia’ nor *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* is predominantly concerned with the serving classes, they both incorporate similar scenes in which the protagonists are made aware of their existence. In both texts these encounters occur at dawn, perhaps to signify the awakening class consciousness instigated by Marxism. Marx was not particularly interested in the serving classes because he did not consider them as part of a material economy based on labour, yet since they are set in rural rather than industrial areas, servants are the only representatives of the working classes in these texts. In ‘Morpho Eugenia’ William has two such encounters with the servants, the first of which occurs when he is preparing the ‘cloud of butterflies’ (‘ME’, 48) for Eugenia and serves to make him aware of the presence of the domestic servants who had previously been unnoticed: ‘William, running downstairs at six, found a very different population from the

daylight one – a host of silently hurrying, black-clad young women, carrying buckets of cinders, buckets of water, boxes of polishing tools, fistfuls of brooms and brushes and carpet beaters’ (‘ME’, 49). Whilst this first encounter alerts William to the presence of the servants they remain indistinct and are not individualised, they are conceived in naturalist terms as ‘a cloud of young wasps’ (‘ME’, 49). It is William’s second encounter with the dawn population which serves to particularise them. It is during this encounter that William first meets Amy, whom he later refers to as his ‘little beetle-sprite’ (‘ME’, 106). Although Amy is particularised, the nickname William chooses ties her to the natural world and thus prevents him from considering her class position.

Charles’s encounter with the dawn population of Lyme Regis in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* is not as extensive as William’s in ‘Morpho Eugenia’. One explanation for this could be that the serving classes are more continuously present throughout *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* as Sam and Mary are the focus of the novel’s sub-plot. Yet it could also be interpreted as a consequence of the differing social positions occupied by Charles and William. William’s position within Bredely Hall is precarious since he belongs to neither the aristocratic world of the family nor the working world of the servants. Yet as a professional naturalist, William is perhaps closer to the servants and consequently is more prone to a transformation of his perceptions when he does encounter them. In contrast, Charles belongs to the aristocracy and so adopts a position of social superiority towards the lower classes, which prevents him from ever seeing them as individuals. This social superiority is evident in Charles’s response to those he meets during his early-morning walk into Lyme Regis: ‘One or two bade Charles a cheery greeting; and got

very peremptory nods and curt raisings of the ashplant in return' (*FL*, 207).

Moreover, the description of the dawn population in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* denies not only their individuality but also their class status. The narrator informs us that 'the people who were about had that pleasant lack of social pretension, that primeval classlessness of dawn population: simple people setting about their day's work' (*FL*, 207). The designation of the lower classes as 'simple people' implies a pastoral idealisation of country life, which circumvents the social and political realities of the lives of those being described. In this description the narrator adopts the superior attitude of the aristocratic Charles, perhaps ironically, revealing the naivety of Charles's conclusions.

In both texts, the encounters with the 'dawn population' are related to Darwinian ideas. The second of these encounters in 'Morpho Eugenia' explicitly makes this connection since William meets Amy on her way to dispose of the beetles caught in the traps ('ME', 74). This association between Darwin and Marx has been prepared for in the novel by the analogies drawn between the insect communities and that of Bredely Hall. Instead of establishing a correspondence between Darwinian and Marxist ideas, Charles's encounter with the dawn population places them in opposition. Charles encounters the dawn population on his way to the Undercliff, and it is his encounter with the natural world that is more significant; it is in the natural world that Charles is overcome by 'a sudden drench of nature's profoundest secret: the universal parity of existence' (*FL*, 208). The occurrence of this so shortly after his superiority to the dawn population highlights Charles's inability to contemplate the application of Darwin's ideas to human society. Whilst this could be seen as a consequence of his social standing it is also a result of the precise



historical location of the novel; although Fowles chooses a moment when Darwinian ideas were beginning to be digested and become generally acceptable the social implications of Darwinian theory had yet to be grasped. This is part of the novel's double focus, the twentieth-century narrator and readers are aware of the subsequent developments in Marxism which are unknown to the nineteenth-century characters. Such a discrepancy between the position of the characters and that of the readers is explicitly indicated in the narrator's reference to the 'beavered German Jew' (*FL*, 16), of whom Charles is ignorant.

The presentation of sexuality in neo-Victorian fiction often adopts an evolutionist approach, which presumes that the narrative of sexuality is a progressive one and that we moderns are superior to the Victorians because we are more sexually liberated. In 'Morpho Eugenia' Adamson's journals are clearly modelled on Darwin's account of his time aboard *The Beagle*; indeed, since Darwin's journal accounts were published in 1845 Adamson is self-consciously modelling himself on Darwin in his decision to keep such a journal.<sup>31</sup> Although the world Byatt recreates is entirely that of the nineteenth century, the incorporation of Adamson's sexual desires in his journal accounts marks their divergence from the Darwinian model and subtly indicates to the reader that they are reading a neo-Victorian, rather than Victorian, text. The presentation of Adamson's sexual desires, however, does not betray a simplistic evolutionist attitude, rather, as I have explored in Chapter 2, the depiction of sexuality in these texts is far more complex.

In her article on 'Morpho Eugenia' Sally Shuttleworth asserts that the depiction of an incestuous relationship is a prominent feature of retro-Victorian

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<sup>31</sup> This entails a blurring of the boundary between "historical" and "fictional" characters since the fictional Adamson is both modelled on and models himself on the historical Darwin.



novels.<sup>32</sup> Whilst doubtful as to its overall prominence and prevalence within neo-Victorian fiction, it is clearly an important feature of 'Morpho Eugenia', which portrays the incestuous relationship between Eugenia and Edgar.<sup>33</sup> The question of incest clearly relates to Darwin's theory of evolution. Darwin directly addresses the issue of inbreeding in *On the Origin of Species*, claiming that close inbreeding would damage fertility, hindering the species' chances of reproduction and hence survival.<sup>34</sup> In the specific instance of the pairing of siblings, Darwin argues that the breed would become extinct within only a few generations.<sup>35</sup> Incest became an important consideration for the Victorians in the 1860s, in part as a result of the emergence of modern anthropology, the founding concept of which was the prohibition against incest. Anthropologists claimed that this prohibition was present amongst even the most primitive communities and therefore qualified as a universal law.<sup>36</sup> In light of Darwin's theory of natural selection, exogamy became ever more crucial since the adaptation of a species would be best achieved by breeding with other creatures that possessed effective features. After discovering the incestuous nature of Eugenia's relationship with Edgar, Adamson expresses his disgust and horror in naturalistic terms. Of the children born during his marriage to Eugenia, Adamson comments that

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<sup>32</sup> Shuttleworth, 265, fn 22.

<sup>33</sup> The familial relationship between Edgar and Eugenia is unclear in the novella, the reader is informed that Alabaster's first wife 'had borne him two sons, Edgar and Lionel' but Eugenia is not mentioned as a child of his second wife, Gertrude ('ME', 22). Reviewers tend to overlook this deliberate ambiguity. For instance, Heidi Hansson declares that Edgar and Eugenia are half-brother and half-sister, 'The Double Voice of Metaphor: A. S. Byatt's 'Morpho Eugenia', *Twentieth Century Literature* 45 (1999): 452-66, 457; whilst Richard Todd claims they are brother and sister, *A. S. Byatt* (London: Northcote House, 1997) 36-7.

<sup>34</sup> Darwin, *Origin*, 96, 249.

<sup>35</sup> Darwin, *Origin*, 253.

<sup>36</sup> The principle of exogamous marriage, of which the incest prohibition is a guarantee, was first identified and classified as such by John Fergus McLennan, *Primitive Marriage. An Inquiry Into The Origin of the Form of Capture in Marriage Ceremonies* (Edinburgh: Adam & Charles Black, 1865). As Frazer notes, however, 'It is fair to add, and McLennan himself pointed it out [...], that the discovery of exogamy had been anticipated by [...] R G. Latham' in *Descriptive Ethnology*, 1859. J. G. Frazer, *Totemism and Exogamy: A Treatise on Certain Early Forms of Superstition and Society* (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1910) 4 Vols., Vol. 4, 72 fn.1.

they had all 'bred true to stock' ('ME', 71). In contrast, Eugenia's sister, Rowena, remains childless at the end of the novella despite an exogamous marriage.<sup>37</sup>

The incestuous relationship portrayed in 'Morpho Eugenia' also relates to the class issues in the text. As a professional naturalist, Adamson belongs to a much lower social class than the Alabasters. Consequently, his marriage to Eugenia might have espoused anxieties about the dilution of the family-line, which would have been prevented by Eugenia's sexual relationship with someone from the same social standing as herself, indeed from her own noble blood line. The fact that Rev. Harald Alabaster gave permission for his daughter to marry Adamson can be seen as an acceptance on the part of aristocratic society to the necessity for adaptation. Yet since the children take after the Alabaster line the suggestion is that they are the result of Eugenia's sexual relations with her brother, who belongs to the same social stock.

### **Chance Vs Design**

The concern with the structuring narratives of Darwinism and Marxism informs the conflict between chance and design that is dramatised in these fictions. This conflict is also a consequence of the text's engagement with Victorian fiction, which often portrays a designed world in which even the slightest coincidences are planned to have significance for the plot. The most famous practitioner of this kind of plotting is Charles Dickens, whose fictional universes are so tightly structured and designed that there exists a web of attachments connecting every character to the principal action of the plot. The conception of the realist novel as a structured universe akin to that of the paranoid is examined in the following chapter in relation

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<sup>37</sup> See Hansson, 460.

to the opposition between design and chance in *The Quincunx*. This desire for a structured universe where design is the governing principle can be seen as an attempt to counter the randomness ascribed to the universe in Darwin's theory.

The radicalism of Darwin's theory was not the concept of evolution but the proposed method by which evolution occurred, Natural Selection. Darwin's theory of Natural Selection counteracted the progressive account of evolution proposed by Lamarck, which was based on the principle that creation is in a constant state of advancement and improvement. For Lamarck, evolution occurs as a consequence of the exertion of will by the organism, which leads to the adaptation of features that are subsequently transmitted down the generations. The most frequent example being the development of the Giraffe's long neck, which was thought to have become gradually elongated as a consequence of continual stretching to reach the leaves on the upper branches of trees. Whilst for Lamarck an organism adapts certain features in order to survive, in Darwin's theory these features occur randomly and naturally within an organism and are only perpetuated because they are best suited to the environment and thus more able to compete for food. Whilst the term "selection" suggests a selector, Darwin's theory actually removed agency, both of the species and some omniscient being, from the process of adaptation, replacing it with chance as the determining factor of evolution. Although Darwin asserts that the ascription of variations to chance is 'a wholly incorrect expression' he is at pains throughout his thesis to stress that the variations are not caused by a creator but rather are random occurrences that are perpetuated by a chance correlation between the adapted features and environmental conditions.

Despite denying the presence of a designing will behind the process of evolution Darwin cannot completely resign himself to a world governed purely by chance. Of the use of the term chance in his thesis he states that although 'a wholly incorrect expression [...] it serves to acknowledge plainly our ignorance of the cause of each particular variation'.<sup>38</sup> Although Darwin is not able to dismiss entirely the belief in a purpose behind the process of evolution he does reject the notion that that purpose is part of some grand design or ordered system in the natural world. Moreover, Darwin attempts to present an entirely neutral thesis since he does not propose that successive generations improve upon their ancestors, merely that they are better suited to the particular environment. He is, however, unable to extricate himself completely from the prevailing Victorian ideology of progress and concedes at the end of his thesis that since 'natural selection works solely by and for the good of each being, all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress towards perfection'.<sup>39</sup> If a species is unable to adapt effectively to the environment then it will be unable to compete successfully for food and so will eventually disappear. For Darwin, once a species has become extinct identical forms will never reappear.<sup>40</sup> Despite the predominant neutrality of Darwin's theory it was often co-opted into the Victorian ideology of progress. Such interpretations implicitly depended upon the notion that there is a design which evolution is following and thus installs a circular argument, claiming that the species which survive are necessarily those that were meant to survive. This inevitability of evolution is evident in the assumption in some neo-Victorian fictions that since the modern era came out of the Victorian era it was inevitable that the Victorian sensibility would be replaced by the modern one.

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<sup>38</sup> Darwin, *Origin*, 131.

<sup>39</sup> Darwin, *Origin*, 489.

<sup>40</sup> Darwin, *Origin*, 313.



In contrast to Darwin's model of the natural world, Marx's model of history is based on a belief in an ordered, progressive system. Marx's theory claimed that all societies would pass through three identifiable stages of society: Feudalism, Capitalism and Communism. His account rejects the chance or random nature of evolution in Darwin's theory, reinstating individual agency as the driving principle. For Marx, the final stage of Communism is only attainable through a conscious and deliberate act of revolution on the part of the proletariat. Whilst it did not have any religious foundations, Marx's theory retained the notion of historical purpose present in Christian accounts of human history; its progressive ideology replicates the Christian belief that all humans are moving towards the state of perfection to be achieved in heaven or, in Marx's account, the Communist state. Marx's proposition that history is determined by the economic modes of production often leads to the characterisation of his theory of historical development as a form of historical determinism. Marx's famous quotation on man's relationship to history is often used as a justification for this determinist interpretation: 'Man makes his own history, but he does not make it out of the whole cloth; he does not make it out of conditions chosen by himself, but out of such as he finds close at hand.'<sup>41</sup> Yet the key point for Marx is that people are free, albeit only to a certain extent, to make their own history; it is only when the proletariat make a conscious resolution to alter their state of oppression within capitalism that the revolution can be achieved.

In 'Morpho Eugenia' the interplay between chance and design, free-will and determinism, is figured as a conflict between science and religion, dramatised through the positions held by William Adamson and his clergyman father-in-law

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<sup>41</sup> Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, trans. Daniel De Leon, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Co., 1914) 9.



Harald Alabaster. Alabaster's approach represents the appropriation of Darwin's theory to the notion of a divine order behind the adaptations within the natural world.<sup>42</sup> Even William recognises the comfort of such an approach, claiming 'it is easier for us to imagine the patient attention of an infinite watcher than to comprehend blind chance' ('ME', 36). He falls prey to this trap himself when, shortly after he has made the shocking discovery of his wife's incestuous relationship with Edgar, he is confronted with the word 'INCEST' in a game of anagrams. William initially assigns responsibility for the occurrence of the letters to the abstract hand of Fate: 'however we protest we are moved by chance, and struck by random shocks and blows, in fact there *is* Design, there is Fate, it has us in its grip' ('ME', 153). He subsequently attempts to uncover a more concrete explanation for the appearance of the letters, attributing Matty as the source: 'It was possible, of course, that *she* had somehow shaped his cards' ('ME', 153). Despite this alteration in the assignment of agency, in both accounts William assumes that the appearance of the cards is not one of those 'random shocks and blows' ('ME', 153) but something invested with significance and hence part of an ordered system. The presence of an omniscient force controlling the action of the novel is again raised in relation to William's discovery. As a consequence of the anagram game, William questions Matty about the summons which resulted in his discovery of Eugenia's incestuous relationship. Matty denies responsibility, shifting it instead to 'the invisible people', arguing that 'now and then *the house* simply decides that something must happen' ('ME', 155). Of course, the notion of an external force guiding and controlling the

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<sup>42</sup> For a Victorian response to Darwin that adopted a similar approach see [C. W. Russell], 'Notices of Books', rev. of *Darwinism and Design; or, Creation by Evolution* by George St. Clair, *The Dublin Review* 75 (1874): 232-40.

action of the characters is literally true since the whole story is part of the ordered system constructed by Byatt.

The metafictional intrusions in Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* explicitly associate the theme of chance and design in the novel with the notion of authorial control. At certain points the characters seem unable to exercise their free will, as if compelled by a force stronger than themselves. When Charles comes upon the sleeping Sarah in the barn the reader is told 'He looked back, he was about to go; and then he heard his own voice say her name. He had not intended it to speak. Yet it spoke' (FL, 214). Such self-reflexive comments remind the reader of the controlling force exerted by the author upon the characters. The presence of such an external force is confirmed in the first ending (Chapter 60) in Charles's declaration: 'And he comprehended: it had been in God's hands, in His forgiveness of their sins' (FL, 392-393). This reading, however, is only possible if the first ending is accepted by the reader and thus the incorporation of alternative endings within the novel problematises its position in relation to the chance/design debate. Indeed, the very fact of the inclusion of alternative endings prompts questions of free will and design. Does the presentation of three endings provide the reader with greater freedom?<sup>43</sup> Or does it merely confirm the narrator's ultimate control since the alternatives the reader is presented with are those selected by the narrator?

Conversely, there are several instances in the novel in which the characters' free will is supposedly exerted over the controlling influence of the narrator. One such example is the narrator's claim that 'When Charles left Sarah on her cliff-edge, I ordered him to walk straight back to Lyme Regis. But he did not; he gratuitously

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<sup>43</sup> Both Foster (85) and David Leon Higdon ('Endgames in John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*,' *English Studies* 65 (1984): 350-361, 360) assert that the presentation of three alternative endings is a guarantee of the greater freedom accorded to the reader in the novel.

turned and went down to the Dairy' (*FL*, 86). The narrator recognises and pre-emptively the argument that since the world is created by him he must have intended, if only sub-consciously, Charles to take the path to the Dairy: 'I can only report – and I am the most reliable witness – that the idea seemed to me to come clearly from Charles, not myself' (*FL*, 86). The ironic, game-playing tone of the narrator throughout the novel, however, prevents a complete acceptance of this denial of control. This denial of control is further extended to a denial of omniscient knowledge of his characters. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, the narrator questions both the possibility and permissibility of omniscience (*FL*, 84-85) and defends his rejection of control in Darwinian terms claiming that '[...] a world is an organism, not a machine [...] a genuinely created world must be independent of its creator; a planned world (a world that fully reveals its planning) is a dead world' (*FL*, 86). Whilst the narrator conceives of the opposition between free will and determinism in explicitly Darwinian terms I believe that the opposition of chance and design is also related to the Marxist narrative of the texts. The Marxist narrative of historical development suggests that there is structure and plan to the process of historical development and that the final stage of that design, communism, can only be achieved through an exercise of free-will by the proletariat.

### **Strategies for Closure**

The thematic conflict between free-will and determinism, chance and design, is also played out at a structural level in these texts' approach towards narrative closure and the opposition between readerly freedom and authorial control. The assessment of Victorian fiction as presenting a thoroughly designed universe is most frequently substantiated with reference to the fixed conventions that supposedly

govern narrative closure.<sup>44</sup> As I indicated in the previous chapters, the fixed endings of Victorian fiction are seen to derive from the supposed omniscient and totalising perspective of the realist narrator; since they possess complete knowledge of the characters they can provide the reader with a summary of the characters' lives beyond the end of the story. As neo-Victorian texts, these novels are acutely aware of the historical conditions of realism in both the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. Their engagement with Victorian strategies for closure, therefore, must be understood within the context of Victorian culture.

The scientific theories of Darwin and Lyell prompted anxieties concerning endings in both history and fiction. These scientific advancements projected the origin of the earth immeasurably back in time, leading, as Beer remarks, to 'the loss of a close-knit beginning and ending in the natural world.'<sup>45</sup> According to Beer, this prompted an insistence on the "real" in Victorian fiction and therefore at least partially accounts for the dominance of realist narratives in the Victorian era. These scientific advancements also impacted upon the structure of Victorian novels. Levine suggests that, as a consequence of Darwin's theory, 'closure is perceived as artificial and inadequate because it implies an end to history [...]'<sup>46</sup> This has repercussions for the conventions of closure in Victorian fiction: 'The growing nineteenth-century dissatisfactions with closure – the most marked and inevitable feature of "plotting" – are further reflections of this Darwinian movement away from teleology and [...] toward a new kind of emphasis on continuing change'.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> See John R. Reed, *Victorian Conventions* (Ohio: Ohio UP, 1975).

<sup>45</sup> Gillian Beer, 'Origins and Oblivion in Victorian Narrative,' *Arguing with the Past: Essays in Narrative from Woolf to Sidney* (London: Routledge, 1989): 12-33, 16.

<sup>46</sup> George Levine, *Darwin and the Novelists: Patterns of Science in Victorian Fiction* (London: Harvard UP, 1988) 17.

<sup>47</sup> Levine, 19.



Similarly, it could be expected that Marx's theories caused concern over the future since he so confidently predicted the occurrence of a proletarian revolution. Since these texts are so concerned to evoke the specificity and singularity of the Victorian period and its literature, it is necessary to interrogate the stereotypes of Victorian narrative closure through a detailed consideration of actual Victorian texts. My discussion of endings in relation to design and chance in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and 'Morpho Eugenia' will be followed by an examination of the presentation of endings in Victorian fiction and the specific intertextual relationships these texts establish with Victorian novels.

First, however, I want to consider contemporary critical accounts of readerly freedom and authorial control. Interestingly, one of the neo-Victorian authors I discuss, A. S. Byatt, addresses this issue in her critical writings.<sup>48</sup> Whilst clearly tackling theoretical issues, Byatt's discussion is textually grounded as she expounds the concepts of "closed" or "open" texts with reference to specific authors. Whilst the terms "open" and "closed" are taken from Umberto Eco's semiotic analysis of these issues in *The Role of the Reader* (1981), Byatt's conception of texts is in a similar vein to Eco's and so I explore these two models in conjunction. According to Eco's semiotic model, a "closed" text is one in which the author 'disguises his own productive activity and tries to convince the spectator that he and him are the same'.<sup>49</sup> As an example of supposedly closed texts Byatt chooses the novels of George Eliot, arguably the high point of Victorian realist narrative, which are characterised by the presence of an omniscient third-person narrator. In contrast,

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<sup>48</sup> A. S. Byatt, 'Introduction', *Passions of the Mind: Selected Writings* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1991) 1-6.

<sup>49</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (London: Hutchinson, 1981) 40.



Eco designates as “open” those texts that are characterised by indeterminacy and playfulness.<sup>50</sup> Byatt proposes the novels of Samuel Beckett and Alain Robbe-Grillet as examples of such “open” texts.

Eco proceeds to argue that these distinctions are only superficial and that, in fact, the reverse is true. Supposedly “open” texts are actually more restrictive than the apparently “closed” texts which are, in fact, ‘so immoderately “open” to every possible interpretation’.<sup>51</sup> Byatt’s argument draws the same conclusion, claiming that those texts that seem most closed off and restrictive of readerly interpretation and freedom are actually more open to it. Of the authoritative voice of the Victorian realist omniscient narrator so prevalent in George Eliot’s novels, Byatt says that ‘despite her passionate morality, her reasonable proceedings leave room for dissent and qualification [...]’ on behalf of the reader.<sup>52</sup> In fact, the reader’s dissent is not produced in spite of, but precisely because of, the authoritative tone of the narrator, which provides the reader with a fixed position against which they can react. In contrast, Byatt claims that whilst the playful and indeterminate texts of the modernists would appear to be more open to readerly freedom, they actually close off this possibility since the reader is only granted freedom to “play” within the boundaries constructed by the author. In these texts ‘the reader’s freedom is framed quite differently by the novelist’s strategies. You – or I – may “play freely” or “create” – but with the freedom of the ludo player [...], that is, only within the rules of the game constructed by the author.’<sup>53</sup> Thus, such seemingly open texts actually limit the reader’s freedom despite their overt playfulness and indeterminacy.

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<sup>50</sup> Eco, *Role of the Reader*, 8.

<sup>51</sup> Eco, *Role of the Reader*, 8.

<sup>52</sup> Byatt, ‘Introduction’, *Passions of the Mind*, 4.

<sup>53</sup> Byatt, ‘Introduction’, *Passions of the Mind*, 4.

It is interesting that Byatt's examples of closed and open texts are taken from a Victorian and a modernist writer respectively.<sup>54</sup> As neo-Victorian novels, the texts under consideration in this thesis engage with both Victorian and modernist texts and so their position in relation to the opposition between closed and open texts is more complex. Byatt's model provides a possible explanation for the current wave of postmodern writers who return to Victorian narrative strategies. According to Byatt, rather than extending readerly freedom by writing playful and indeterminate postmodern texts, these writers are actually restricting it and so return to the narrative model of the Victorian era in order to have something fixed and definite against which both they and their readers can react. Nevertheless, as I will show in the following discussion, neo-Victorian novels actually reveal the indeterminacy and playfulness of Victorian novels themselves. Thus, despite being such a prominent contributor to the genre, Byatt's critical model is unable to account for the endings of neo-Victorian fiction.

*The French Lieutenant's Woman* has become notorious for its inclusion of alternative endings within its narrative and the various reviews and articles on Fowles's text equally propose alternative interpretations of his intention in adopting this technique. Whilst Foster sees the two endings as the ultimate example of the reader's involvement and freedom within the novel, Holmes sees them as an expression of the author's ultimate control over the reader.<sup>55</sup> The novel actually presents three alternative endings, yet most reviewers implicitly agree that only the

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<sup>54</sup> Although Byatt also uses Sterne's work to exemplify the concept of an "open" text this merely reveals the extent to which the structuring narrative of literary history is deconstructed in the relationships constructed in neo-Victorian fiction.

<sup>55</sup> Foster, 85. Frederick. M. Holmes, 'The Novel, Illusion, and Reality: The Paradox of Omniscience in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*,' *Metafiction*, ed. Mark Currie (London: Longman, 1995) 206–226, 212.

last two need to be considered. The majority of these critics simply ignore the ending provided in Chapter 44, whilst those that do refer to it deny its significance.<sup>56</sup> Higdon actually provides manuscript evidence to support his claim that Fowles ‘intended his readers to reject this “false finale”’, the term which Fowles himself employed in an early chapter plan of his novel.<sup>57</sup> Thus, the critics diminish the reader’s freedom over the choice of ending by denying the possibility that the ending in Chapter 44 could be accepted. Within the novel, the narrator’s subsequent revelation that this ending is a projected ending dreamt by Charles further restricts the reader’s freedom to choose it.<sup>58</sup> Charles’s projected ending highlights the deep need for closure in both life and fiction:

We screen in our minds hypotheses about how we might behave, about what might happen to us; and these novelistic or cinematic hypotheses often have very much more effect on how we actually do behave, when the real future becomes the present, than we generally allow (*FL*, 295).

Since the projected end, whether in fiction or in life, affects the outcome of the “real” future the projected ending of chapter 44 cannot be wholly dismissed. The projected ending provides a ‘thoroughly traditional ending’ (*FL*, 295) in which the after-history of the major characters is recounted, and even contains an intertextual allusion to a Victorian novel.<sup>59</sup> The reader is told that ‘Charles and Ernestina did not live happily ever after; but they lived together, though Charles finally survived her by a decade

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<sup>56</sup> One such example is Robert Huffaker’s claim that ‘The last two endings [...] are the ones which determine the book’s final impact’, *John Fowles* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980) 105.

<sup>57</sup> Higdon, ‘Endgames’ 354.

<sup>58</sup> Charles Scruggs refers to Chapter 44 as the ‘imaginary ending’, ‘The Two Endings of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*,’ *Modern Fiction Studies* 31.1 (1985): 95-113. This term is deeply problematic since all endings, whether in fiction or history, are imaginary; something of which both Victorian novelists and the knowing twentieth-century narrator of Fowles’s novel are acutely aware.

<sup>59</sup> The description of Mrs Poulteney’s descent of the infernal staircase recalls Mrs Sparsit’s staircase in Charles Dickens’s *Hard Times* (1854), which Sadrin sees as an example of Dickens’ ‘modern perversity’, demonstrating ‘that he could play at hide-and-seek with the truth of his fiction’. Anny Sadrin, *Great Expectations* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988) 168.

(and earnestly mourned her throughout it)' (*FL*, 292). The ironic tone of these comments reveals the narrator's assumption that this ending will be rejected by the reader.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, at a more superficial and obvious level, the projected ending is undermined by the fact that it occurs some seventeen chapters prior to the end of the novel.

As I have shown, the projected ending is rejected by critics, the narrator, and seemingly Fowles himself, in his manuscript designation of it as a 'false finale', yet it remains within the novel and so needs to be accounted for in any explanation of Fowles's techniques of narrative closure. The inclusion of three alternative endings in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* enables Fowles to explore and represent diverse strategies for closure within fiction. The vocabulary used to discuss the strategies for closure is taken from Marianna Torgovnick's *Closure in the Novel* (1981).<sup>61</sup>

Torgovnick provides a study of 'the process by which a novel reaches an adequate and appropriate conclusion, or at least what the author hopes is an adequate, appropriate conclusion'.<sup>62</sup> Her account is a formalist one of the various strategies for providing closure in fiction. She divides endings into two formal patterns: epilogues and scenes. The epilogue ending establishes temporal distance from the events of the narrative and usually provides an account of the after-history of the major characters.<sup>63</sup> In contrast, a scenic ending adopts a close-up perspective which usually focuses on a dialogue between the characters; the narrator generally does not intrude upon this scene.<sup>64</sup> Torgovnick then identifies the various strategies that can be adopted within these forms of endings. First, she posits five terms to account for the

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<sup>60</sup> See Olshen, 82.

<sup>61</sup> Marianna Torgovnick, *Closure in the Novel* (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1981).

<sup>62</sup> Torgovnick, 6.

<sup>63</sup> See Torgovnick, 11.

<sup>64</sup> See Torgovnick, 11.

ending's relationship to the rest of the novel: circularity, parallelism, incompleteness, tangential, and linkage.<sup>65</sup> Second she proposes the possible viewpoints of the author as either "close-up" or "overview".<sup>66</sup> Finally, she characterises the relationship between the author and the reader as either complementary, incongruent or confrontational.<sup>67</sup> Despite claiming that her criteria for an adequate ending depend on the 'shape of the fiction' as a whole, Torgovnick assumes that parallelism and circularity provide the best models for closure.<sup>68</sup> Yet, in circularity at least, telos is deferred so that a conclusion is never reached. Moreover, Torgovnick's account of "confrontational" and "complementary" relationships naively assumes that an authorial position can be identified. Whilst such a set of terms is useful for identifying and designating these various strategies her model is too schematic and restrictive, especially for dealing with neo-Victorian fiction's complex intertextual relations to the endings of Victorian novels.

The projected ending provided in Chapter 44 initially takes the form of an epilogue in its account of the after-history of the major characters; of the minor characters, the narrator provides only the most generalised account: 'Sam and Mary – but who can be bothered with the biography of servants? They married, and bred, and died, in the monotonous fashion of their kind' (*FL*, 292-293). This ironically comments on the "after-history" approach to closure in Victorian fiction since novels that adopted this strategy rarely narrated the after-history of minor characters. The prevalence of this approach in Victorian fiction is a consequence of the position of the realist narrator who was credited with possessing superior knowledge to the

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<sup>65</sup> See Torgovnick, 13-14.

<sup>66</sup> See Torgovnick, 15.

<sup>67</sup> See Torgovnick, 16-17.

<sup>68</sup> Torgovnick, 6.



reader concerning the world of the novel and was granted an omniscience that enabled them to transcend not only space but also time. Thus, the realist narrator was able to see into the future and divulge its contents to the reader of the novel. By providing an overview of future events in the ending of Chapter 44 the narrator initially seems to be replicating the position of the realist narrator; he informs the reader of events that occur in the future and so possesses knowledge lacked by the characters. In keeping with Fowles's contradictory relationship towards Victorian conventions throughout the novel, the narrator undermines the perspective of the overview ending at the same time as he adopts it. Fowles's narrator denies the superior knowledge fundamental to the overview ending, flippantly commenting 'They begat what shall it be – let us say seven children' (*FL*, 292). This remark reveals both that endings are arbitrary and fictional, and that the narrator does not possess full knowledge. Thus, the narrator is transformed from the omniscient narrator associated with Victorian realism, who can see into the future and relate the external reality and psychological causality of their characters, to the narrator of a modernist novel, who is more concerned with the individual interiority of psychological realism. Yet the ending recounted transpires to be not future events but rather the imaginings of Charles; the denial of knowledge, therefore, is perhaps merely a reflection of its status as a projected ending.

In contrast to the epilogue ending of chapter 44, Chapter 60 presents a scenic ending in its depiction of an encounter between Sarah and Charles, which establishes parallelism with other points in the novel. The most obvious of these, to which the narrator overtly draws the reader's attention, is Charles's use of his watch to subdue a child. The narrator reminds us that this scene has been played out previously in the

novel, saying 'He fumbled hastily for his watch, as he had once before in a similar predicament. It had the same good effect' (*FL*, 391). On that previous occasion (Chapter 41) Charles used the watch to pacify the child of a prostitute, who, significantly, was named Sarah. Whilst there are similarities between the two instances, the parallelism actually highlights the fundamental difference; this time it is Charles's own child, representing his entry into the Victorian ideology of family, where Sarah will occupy the respectable role of his wife. In Torgovnick's model, parallelism and circularity are proclaimed as the best techniques for achieving closure. According to this view, then, the technique of parallelism employed in this ending contributes to its increased plausibility in contrast to the projected ending. Yet this instance of parallelism actually denies closure since the scene can only be understood in relation to that earlier event. Moreover, the complementary relationship allowed for in this ending is undermined by the reader's awareness that it is not the final chapter. The narrator himself recognises that 'the second [ending] will seem, so strong is the tyranny of the last chapter, the final, the "real" version' (*FL*, 349). Once again then, the supposed freedom of the reader is challenged by the physical composition of the novel, which reasserts authorial control. Despite claiming that the order of the last two endings was decided on the turn of a florin (*FL*, 349) the narrator's self-consciousness actually serves to highlight the role played by the author in the construction of the novel.

The last ending in the novel (Chapter 61) is also a scenic ending that returns to, and continues, the dialogue of the previous chapter, presenting an alternative outcome. The assumption is that the reader is free to choose between these two endings yet the narrator's interjection, that 'what you must not think is that this is a

less plausible ending to their story' (*FL*, 398), precludes outright dismissal on the part of the reader. Whilst the reader is told that this ending is no 'less plausible' than the previous ending, if we accept Torgovnick's evaluation of endings, it certainly seems more plausible than the projected ending. This ending closes with an image that recalls the start of the novel, thus imposing the principle of circularity on the conclusion. The image of Charles staring 'out again, upon the unplumb'd, salt, estranging sea' (*FL*, 399) recalls the first image of Sarah standing 'motionless, staring, staring out to sea' (*FL*, 9). Whilst Torgovnick considers the principle of circularity as one of the best methods for achieving narrative closure, it actually denies closure since it returns the reader to the beginning of the narrative. Moreover, it reconstructs the beginning as inevitably moving towards the end it reaches, only ever a foreshadowing of that end, replicating the evolutionist attitude which reconstructs the Victorians as the inevitable forerunners of modern subjects.

Charles Scruggs's article provides an interesting account of the presence and purpose of all three endings within *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, which is based on an application of evolutionary theory to literary development.<sup>69</sup> He claims that each of the three endings reflects the fictional conventions of a specific historical period, the eighteenth-century, Victorian and modern, respectively, the historical periods they represent occur chronologically within the text.<sup>70</sup> This temporal

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<sup>69</sup> Scruggs, 'The Two Endings of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*,' 95-113. David Leon Higdon adopts a similar approach arguing that 'The three endings epitomize the historical movement chronicled in the novel which is underlined if we say that the endings are Victorian, Edwardian, and contemporary, or sentimental, romantic, and existential', 'Endgames,' 359.

<sup>70</sup> Scruggs's classification of these endings relies upon a misreading of previous literature. For instance, Scruggs's classification of the projected ending as that of an eighteenth-century novel ignores the intertextual allusion to Dickens's *Hard Times* identified earlier. Moreover, the first ending is supposedly the Victorian ending yet Scruggs's assessment of Sarah's position in this ending relies on a comparison with a pre-Victorian text, Jane Austen's *Persuasion* (1818). Even more troubling, the parallel between Sarah and Anne Elliot is dependent on a reconstruction of Austen's novel which

movement implies the teleological bias often present in considerations of neo-Victorian fiction, which assumes superiority of the modern period simply because it comes later. Scruggs betrays his bias towards the modern period in his privileging of the second 'more open ended (hence the more modern)', ending as the "real" ending.<sup>71</sup> Yet this assessment of the Victorian and modern status of the last two endings depends upon an oversimplification of Victorian endings which is undermined by a consideration of actual Victorian novels. Thus, the incorporation of multiple and self-consciously aware endings is equally a result of the Victorian, as well as postmodern, context of the novel. Scruggs seems on the verge of recognising this when he identifies the intertextual allusion to Dickens's *Great Expectations*: 'in truth, Fowles may have consciously reversed the two endings of Dickens' novel', yet he refuses to relinquish the 'modern' status he has ascribed to the second ending of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.<sup>72</sup> Whilst providing an interesting example of the evolutionist attitude amongst both writers and critics of neo-Victorian fiction, Scruggs's account is too limited, naïve and reductive for such a complex text as *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.

In contrast to *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Byatt's 'Morpho Eugenia' is not as explicit in its considerations of closure, possibly as a consequence of Byatt's decision not to employ a twentieth-century frame for the telling of her nineteenth-century story. Yet the issue of closure is problematised, both in 'Morpho Eugenia' itself and also in its relationship to its companion text, 'The Conjugal Angel'. Since my consideration of the nature of endings within 'Morpho Eugenia' is prompted by

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presents Anne as a romantic heroine who waits until she is ready before she makes a choice of husband, rather than the victim of unwanted interference from her friends.

<sup>71</sup> Scruggs, 96. The assessment of this ending betrays Scrugg's eagerness to identify authorial intention in this novel and too naively conflates the position of the narrator with that of the author.

<sup>72</sup> Scruggs, 96.



its presentation of Darwinian themes I will initially consider it in isolation from 'The Conjugal Angel'.

Whilst Byatt does not overtly flout Victorian conventions in the closure of 'Morpho Eugenia' she is nevertheless aware of them and how they inform her fiction. Mid-way through the story, after the marriage of William and Eugenia, the narrator muses upon the nature of endings:

And so he lived happily ever after? Between the end of the fairy story with its bridal triumph, between the end of the novel, with its hard-won moral vision, and the brief glimpse of death and due succession, lies a placid and peaceful pseudo-eternity of harmony [...] ('ME', 69).

The narrator suggests that a conventional Victorian narrative would have concluded with the marriage, and the implicit assumption that it will continue happily. Yet Byatt's novella is a neo-Victorian rather than Victorian narrative and so her plot begins where conventional plots usually end. The real focus of 'Morpho Eugenia' is what happens after the marriage of William and Eugenia, and the discovery of the incestuous relationship between Eugenia and Edgar. In choosing to explicitly depict an incestuous relationship within the fictional world of 'Morpho Eugenia' Byatt transgresses the conventions of Victorian fiction and undermines the moral and ideological values normally espoused at the end of Victorian fiction. One of the most recognised conventions of Victorian fiction is the concluding marriage; indeed even the sensation fiction of the 1860s invariably ended with the restoration of the bourgeois family that had been threatened by the actions of an errant, typically female, figure.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> For example, in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) the errant female dies in a lunatic asylum and the bourgeois family is reinstated through the marriage of Robert Audley and Clara Talboys.



Whilst Byatt's novella embodies the transgression of Victorian sensation fiction, its explicit exposure of the incestuous relationship between Edgar and Eugenia exceeds even the boundaries of sensation fiction. As Kendrick says, 'The Victorians loved shocking discoveries in their fiction [, but] they never would have countenanced the one Byatt springs'.<sup>74</sup> Despite these transgressions, 'Morpho Eugenia' does uphold certain Victorian ideologies, such as individualism, which is championed in the concluding scene of Matty and William sailing off towards the Amazon.<sup>75</sup> Byatt does not adopt finality in her presentation, however, but leaves her characters suspended 'on the crest of a wave, between the ordered green fields and hedgerows, and the coiling, striving mass of forest along the Amazon shore' ('ME', 160). Thus, the characters are left hovering between a world governed by order and one where chaos and chance appear to dominate; and the novel similarly hovers between imposing a fixed conclusion and leaving the end entirely open.

Shuttleworth has interpreted this ending optimistically, claiming that 'Survival, not destruction, is the message of this tale',<sup>76</sup> yet her interpretation can only be sustained if 'Morpho Eugenia' is read in isolation from its companion story, 'The Conjugal Angel'. In his review of *Angels and Insects*, Walter Kendrick claims that the link between the two novellas rests on the ending of 'Morpho Eugenia': 'The Victorians hated unhappy endings, and Byatt bows to that taste by turning hers into the subtlest of links between "Morpho Eugenia" and "The Conjugal Angel",

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<sup>74</sup> Walter Kendrick 'Fiction in Review' Rev. of *Angels and Insects* by A. S. Byatt, *Yale Review* 81.4 (Oct 1993): 137.

<sup>75</sup> See Shuttleworth, 268.

<sup>76</sup> Shuttleworth, 268. This is contrasted with the ending of the other retro-Victorian novel Shuttleworth considers, Graham Swift's *Ever After* in which the protagonist Matthew Pearce is drowned, 267.

between this life and the next'.<sup>77</sup> Despite his reductive assessment of Victorian responses to endings, Kendrick's identification of the connection forged between 'Morpho Eugenia' and 'The Conjugal Angel' through the figure of Arturo Papagay is significant for a consideration of closure in 'Morpho Eugenia'.<sup>78</sup> Yet this connection does not entirely resolve the unhappy ending of 'Morpho Eugenia'. Throughout 'The Conjugal Angel', Mrs Papagay, and as a consequence the reader, believes that her husband Arturo has been drowned. Since Arturo was the Captain of the ship *Matty* and William set sail aboard the suggestion is that they too have died. Whilst it transpires at the end of 'The Conjugal Angel' that Arturo did not in fact drown, there is no such narrative resurrection for *Matty* and William and so the unhappy ending of 'Morpho Eugenia' remains as a possibility at least. By leaving her protagonists 'on the crest of a wave' ('ME', 160) Byatt retains the possibility of a happy ending whilst not completely removing that of an unhappy ending. Thus, the novella is open to readerly interpretation but only within the boundaries constructed by Byatt, the reader is only free to choose between the possibility of *Matty* and Adamson's survival or their death.

The open-endedness of neo-Victorian fiction is usually considered in terms of its postmodern, rather than Victorian context. This feature is seen as part of the more general playful attitude towards fiction and the self-conscious approach of many postmodern novelists. The majority of critics assume that Fowles's problematising of closure is a consequence of the twentieth- rather than nineteenth-century elements of the novel. Thomas Foster sees the inclusion of multiple endings as an example of Fowles's 'narrative gamesmanship', whilst Linda Hutcheon sees it as a parody of

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<sup>77</sup> Kendrick, 137.

<sup>78</sup> As Sadrin notes in her analysis of the ending of *Great Expectations*, 'So-called "unhappy" endings were in fact increasingly fashionable in the 1860s, therefore increasingly "conventional",' 170.

modernist conventions.<sup>79</sup> Furthermore, the challenging of endings is also seen as a consequence of the attitudes towards fiction within contemporary critical theory. An awareness of the fictionality of history produces a concomitant recognition of the arbitrary nature of both endings and beginnings, whether in fiction or in history. Yet these texts are steeped in the cultural attitudes of the Victorian era in which they are set and so reveal that the challenging of endings is a response to the cultural anxieties produced by the emergence of Darwin's narrative. An understanding of the Victorian context is particularly important for discussions of fictional conventions since neo-Victorian texts implicitly invoke the conventions of Victorian fiction, even if they subsequently reject them. In fact, especially if they subsequently reject them. As Frank Kermode notes in his study of endings, 'peripeteia depends on our confidence of the end', the falsification of expectations 'could not work if there were not a certain rigidity in the set of our expectations'.<sup>80</sup> The effectiveness of neo-Victorian endings thus depends upon a recognisable set of conventions in opposition to which they are constructed. Before discussing specific Victorian texts I will consider a prominent theoretical account of the conventions for closure within Victorian fiction.

In his essay 'The Art of Fiction' Henry James contemplates English fiction's approach to artistic theory, lamenting the lack of critical discussion on the state of the English novel. He claims that the opposition to the "artistic" idea in the English novel derives from the belief that it would hinder the entertainment and enjoyment value of the text and he proposes the approach towards endings as a feature of this

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<sup>79</sup> Foster, 83; Linda Hutcheon *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988), 59.

<sup>80</sup> Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (1966. London: Oxford UP, 1973) 18.

attitude. The designation of a novel as good, he claims, depends for some readers on a happy ending, with 'a distribution at the last of prizes, pensions, husbands, wives, babies, millions, appended paragraphs, and cheerful remarks'.<sup>81</sup> In contrast, he claims of the artistic idea that 'Its hostility to a happy ending would be evident, and it might even in some cases render any ending at all impossible'.<sup>82</sup> James's account provides a useful summary of the conventions thought to control Victorian fictions, yet his critical opinions are clearly intended to justify his own fictional techniques and this is especially true of his dismissal of the conventional happy ending which is almost entirely absent from his texts. Consequently, the presentation of Victorian endings is over-simplified in order to serve James's polemical purpose. In fact, as I will show, the nature of endings in Victorian fiction was much more complicated than the conventional happy ending outlined by James. Despite this, James's summary remains a useful example of the common misperceptions readers maintain about Victorian endings. Moreover, these misperceptions are deliberately perpetuated by some neo-Victorian novelists in order to enhance the feeling of peripeteia evoked by their apparent transgression of those conventions.

David Lodge's neo-Victorian novel *Nice Work* relies on the reader's implicit acceptance of this misperception of Victorian conventions for the success of his own ending. In a lecture on the Victorian Industrial novel, the protagonist, Robyn Penrose, proposes four alternatives for Victorian closure: a legacy, marriage, emigration or death.<sup>83</sup> At the end of the novel Robyn is faced with three of these four possibilities for closure: she unexpectedly inherits money from an Australian

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<sup>81</sup> Henry James, 'The Art of Fiction,' *The Critical Muse: Selected Literary Criticism*, ed. and intro. Roger Gard (1884; London: Penguin, 1987) 186-206, 190.

<sup>82</sup> James, 'The Art of Fiction', 190.

<sup>83</sup> David Lodge, *Nice Work*, (1988; London: Penguin, 1989) 83.



uncle; is offered a job in America and is proposed to by Charles. Lodge's novel depends upon James's condensation of Victorian narrative conventions for its effect. Yet Lodge appears to self-consciously parody such simplistic views of Victorian endings in Robyn's verdict that 'all the Victorian novelist could offer as a solution to the problems of industrial capitalism were: a legacy, a marriage, emigration or death'.<sup>84</sup> Although Lodge criticises the inadequacies of these conventions he subsequently adopts them for his own narrative.

Lodge's criticism of Victorian endings in *Nice Work* perpetuates the misperceptions of Victorian endings, yet in his critical writings he appears more sensitive to the problematic nature of Victorian endings.<sup>85</sup> Despite this, Lodge's consideration of endings in Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* reverts to the misperception of Victorian endings; Lodge's claim that the endings in Fowles's novel are open and playful depends upon a simplistic view of Victorian fiction as fixed and closed: 'The second ending disqualifies the first, and not only because it comes second. The happy, closed ending is Victorian; the unhappy, open ending [...] – this is modern, and commands our assent.'<sup>86</sup> Lodge's approach to *The French Lieutenant's Woman* demonstrates the adoption of an evolutionist model in considerations of neo-Victorian fiction. It not only demonstrates the persistent desire to claim these texts as innovative and complex postmodern texts, but also reveals that such a narrative depends on a simplification of Victorian fiction. As a more detailed consideration of specific Victorian texts will reveal, Victorian novelists were self-

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<sup>84</sup> Lodge, *Nice Work*, 83.

<sup>85</sup> In his essay 'Ambiguously Ever After: Problematic Endings in English Fiction,' Lodge discusses the problematic endings of Dickens' *Great Expectations* and Brontë's *Villette*. *Working with Structuralism: Essays and Reviews on Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Literature* (Boston, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981) 143-55.

<sup>86</sup> Lodge, 'Ambiguously Ever After,' 155.



consciously aware of the problems of closure and often reacted against the conventions of their contemporaries.

Byatt's technique of suspending closure in 'Morpho Eugenia' has precursors in Victorian fiction and in fact Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853) is one of the most famous examples of a problematic ending in Victorian fiction. According to Hilary Schor, the 'shipwreck metaphors [of *Villette*] inform *The Conjugal Angel*, only to be vanquished by that novel's happy return of the hero from the sea'.<sup>87</sup> Whilst *Villette* clearly provides an intertext for 'The Conjugal Angel' the link already established between the two novellas, and the conclusion of 'Morpho Eugenia' with the protagonists on board a ship, means that a consideration of *Villette* will also prove fruitful for understanding the ending of 'Morpho Eugenia'.

*Villette* provides an example of the uncertainty of closure, and the self-conscious awareness of conventions for closure, in Victorian fiction. In the final pages of the novel the narrator denies the reader a sense of satisfactory closure by refusing to confirm whether or not Paul Emmanuel survives the storm. The narrator leaves the conclusion of the novel to the reader's imagination saying 'Let it be theirs to conceive the delight of joy born again fresh out of great terror, the rapture of rescue from peril, the wondrous reprieve from dread, the fruition of return. Let them picture union and a happy succeeding life'.<sup>88</sup> Rather than providing a conventional ending then, Brontë leaves it to the reader's imagination. As Byatt has argued, texts that seem to deny readerly freedom through such techniques as the incorporation of an omniscient narrator are actually more open to resistance on the part of the reader.

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<sup>87</sup> Hilary M. Schor, 'Sorting, Morphing, and Mourning: A. S. Byatt Ghostwrites Victorian Fiction,' *Victorian Afterlife*, 234-251, 243.

<sup>88</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*, 1853. Eds. Margaret Smith and Herbert Rosengarten. Introd. Margaret Smith (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998) 617.

Whilst Brontë's novel might initially seem to belong to the category of a closed text it is actually an open text in that it refuses to provide a proscriptive ending but rather leaves it to the reader's imagination. Following Byatt's and Eco's model this renders the novel less open to readerly interpretation since although it appears to leave the reader to decide on the ending they are only free to choose between two possibilities, the survival of Paul Emmanuel and his happy reunion with Lucy, or his death at sea. Charlotte Brontë does not simply deny the reader a conventional ending but is acutely aware of and parodies those conventions. In the final paragraph, she parodies her contemporaries' technique of providing a summary of the after-history of all the characters in the novel's closing pages: 'Madame Beck prospered all the days of her life; so did Père Silas; Madame Walravens fulfilled her ninetieth year before she died. Farewell'.<sup>89</sup>

Dickens employs a similarly ambiguous and inconclusive ending in *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859). The reader is presented with a conventionally happy resolution in which Lucie and Evrémonde return to England safely and name their son in memory of Sydney Carton. Yet, as with *Villette*, this happy resolution is qualified, the events recounted are presented as the thoughts and hopes of Sydney Carton at the gallows. The narrator provides the reader with more reason to credit the resolution as "true" by prefacing it with the comment 'If he had given an utterance to his [thoughts], and they were prophetic, they would have been these: [...]'.<sup>90</sup> The illusory nature of all endings is highlighted through the revelation that the ending presented is only the product of Carton's thoughts. The designation of these thoughts as prophetic enables

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<sup>89</sup> Brontë, *Villette* 618.

<sup>90</sup> Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*, 1859, ed. and introd. George Woodcock (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985) 404.

Dickens to satisfy the reader's desire for closure whilst simultaneously problematising the very nature of fictional closure.<sup>91</sup>

Even the most widely read Victorian novel, *Great Expectations* (1860-61), was not immune to problems of closure. The rewriting of the ending in response to Bulwer-Lytton's suggestions is well-known and forces a reconsideration of James's confidence in the dominance of the happy ending in Victorian fiction. It is often argued that Dickens changed his novel in order to conform to the convention for a happy ending at the time, yet there was equally a fashion for unhappy endings and thus the change to a happy ending can be seen as an attempt to avoid being conventional.<sup>92</sup> Whilst this clearly reveals that Dickens was aware of the problems of resolution in fiction, the altered ending presented within the novel is problematic in itself. The final line of the second, happy ending underwent three stages of transformation. It originally read 'I saw the shadow of no parting from her but one' but Dickens felt that the phrase 'but one' bore overtones of 'til death us do part' in the marriage service and so was too explicit about the future of Pip and Estella. The second transformation, therefore, omitted the final clause of the sentence. The third, and final, transformation, however, is the most interesting and significant for my discussion of endings. The syntax of the sentence is altered to read 'I saw no shadow of another parting from her'. The unusual syntactical construction allows for both the possibility that there was no future parting for Pip and Estella as well as the possibility that there was a future parting that Pip was not foresighted enough to

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<sup>91</sup> See also Chris R. Vanden Bossche, 'Prophetic Closure and Disclosing Narrative: *The French Revolution* and *A Tale of Two Cities*,' *Dickens Studies Annual: Essays on Victorian Fiction* 12 (1983): 209-221

<sup>92</sup> See Sadrin, 170. Interestingly Sadrin compares Dickens to John Fowles saying 'In rewriting the last page of his book, he had no intention [...] of presenting [...] some anticipatory version of John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, though he would have been quite capable of such "modern" perversity [...]', 168.

anticipate.<sup>93</sup> Whilst the ambiguous syntax would appear to render the ending open to readerly freedom it actually closes off that possibility by inscribing both possibilities within the text, leaving the reader with the limited freedom of choosing between those two possibilities

As the foregoing discussion has revealed, the nature of endings in neo-Victorian fiction should be conceived of in relation to both Victorian cultural anxieties and fictional practices. In establishing such intertextual links with modes of closure in Victorian fictions, these texts disrupt the evolutionary narrative of literary history which sees postmodernism as a development from and improvement upon previous literary modes. Rather, they reveal that features considered to be hallmarks of literary postmodernism actually have a pre-history and that the common perceptions of Victorian fiction are based upon a reading that simplifies the complexities of the novels. Moreover, tracing these connections with Victorian texts highlights the inadequacy of the category of postmodernism to account for the complexities of neo-Victorian fiction.

## **Evolution of the Novel**

Considerations of why novelists return to these earlier forms of narrative fall into two categories: the recuperation of Victorian narrative forms is seen as prompted by either a sense of continuity or by a sense of discontinuity. Critics belonging to the first camp believe that contemporary novelists return to the Victorian era as a time beset by similar anxieties to those felt in our own, postmodern times.<sup>94</sup> Such a project retrospectively imposes modern categories of understanding onto the past;

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<sup>93</sup> For a discussion of the endings of *Great Expectations* see 'Introduction,' Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (1960-61) ed. Margaret Cardwell (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993).

<sup>94</sup> Levenson, Shuttleworth and Schor on Darwinism in neo-Victorian novels provide examples of this approach.

contemporary society is taken as the end point in relation to which the Victorian era needs to be explained and so the Victorian era is retrospectively reconstructed to conform to what we know to have subsequently occurred. For instance, Fowles claims that in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, he was 'trying to show an existentialist awareness before it was chronologically possible', which is only conceivable because of the twentieth-century position of the author, narrator and readers of his text.<sup>95</sup> Through this retrospective tracing of modern elements in Victorian society Fowles constructs a narrative of inevitable evolution which implies that since the modern era came out of the Victorian era it was inevitable that the Victorian sensibility would be replaced by the modern one.

Critics that see neo-Victorianism as marking discontinuity between our cultural situation and that of the nineteenth century generally conceive of the phenomenon in terms of escapist nostalgia, arguing that novelists return to the Victorian era because it represents an era of stability in contrast to the uncertain and rapidly fluctuating cultural landscape of postmodern society. This equally constructs an evolutionary narrative since it positions Victorian literature as an earlier and less developed form of literature, indeed, as I discussed in the Introduction, Victorian literature is often valued for precisely these reasons. Yet neo-Victorian fiction's commitment to the historical specificity of the Victorian era precludes such a purely nostalgic return to an idealised version of the past.

The phenomenon of neo-Victorian fiction is prompted neither by simple escapism nor identification. These texts establish a double relationship with Victorian fiction which adopts and then adapts certain features. In their treatment of

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<sup>95</sup> John Fowles, 'Notes on an Unfinished Novel,' *The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction* Ed. Malcolm Bradbury (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1977) 136-150, 140.



endings 'Morpho Eugenia' and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* recall Victorian conventions for endings. Whilst they initially appear to combine Victorian forms with postmodern techniques they actually construct a more complex dialogue with the categories of both "Victorian" and "postmodern" literature. As my consideration of specific Victorian texts revealed, the designation of self-conscious, inconclusive endings as a feature of "postmodernism" is undermined by their presence within Victorian texts. Thus the evolutionary narrative of literary history, which posits Victorian literature as an earlier and less sophisticated form than contemporary fiction, is disrupted.<sup>96</sup> Yet I am not suggesting that these Victorian novels should be reclaimed as proto-postmodernist texts, and neither are Fowles and Byatt. Rather, the presence of these features in Victorian fiction needs to be acknowledged and then understood in relation to the specific cultural preoccupations of the era, which is exactly what Byatt and Fowles do in framing their challenges to the supposed conventionality of Victorian endings within the context of Marxist and Darwinian narratives.

The other major feature of Victorian fiction that neo-Victorian texts adopt and adapt is the figure of the realist narrator, which has already been explored in relation to the opposition between design and chance. Fowles overtly transgresses the conventions of the omniscient narrator dominant in Victorian realist novels. The narrator initially appears to belong to the class of omniscient narrators familiar from Victorian novels such as those of George Eliot. From the outset, however, there are numerous hints that this future knowledge is not a result of the narrator's omniscience but rather of his position as a twentieth-century figure. This future

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<sup>96</sup> For such a reductive positioning of Victorian fiction see Glen Ward, *Postmodernism* (London: Hodder Headline, 1997) 32; and Christopher Butler, *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), 73.

perspective of the narrator often takes the form of what Kendrick terms 'hindsighted patronizing', which he believes 'mars' Fowles's novel.<sup>97</sup> The narrator's adoption of this perspective is actually symptomatic of his evolutionist attitude; the twentieth-century narrator appears patronising because he firmly believes that his century has surpassed that of the Victorians. The narrator conveys this sense of superiority to the reader through the mocking and ironic tone he often adopts in relation to his Victorian characters. Of the neo-Victorian texts I examine, Fowles's novel is alone in adopting such a patronising position.

As my discussion of endings and narrators in these texts has shown, neo-Victorian novels do not simply combine Victorian features with postmodern ones. Rather they force a reassessment of assumptions about Victorian fiction by demonstrating how such transgressions can be, and indeed were, incorporated into the narrative of a realist novel. In this sense, these novelists seem to be prompted by a sense of continuity between the Victorian era and contemporary society. Yet they are aware of the dangers of too close an identification between the two eras and are keen to avoid them by continually asserting the historical specificity of the Victorian age. They do not claim that the Victorians' use of such self-reflexive techniques constitutes a form of proto-postmodernism. Rather they reassert the specific cultural conditions that produced such anxieties concerning both realism and the nature of conclusions, by framing their own exploration of these anxieties within a consideration of Darwinian and Marxist narratives in the Victorian era. Yet these texts do not propose a simplistic return to the narrative forms of the Victorian era. Their awareness of the historical specificity of those forms precludes a recuperation

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<sup>97</sup> Kendrick, 135.

of them for the twentieth century because of the alterations in historical circumstances. In returning to Victorian narratives, then, these texts indicate the historical distance between contemporary and Victorian society whilst retaining elements of Victorian narratives that remain useful for the contemporary cultural climate. Consequently, an evolutionary approach to neo-Victorian fiction, which positions twentieth-century novels as improvements upon their Victorian predecessors, is undermined. The double relationship of Victorian and neo-Victorian fiction reveals that both forms are historically distinct and so should be considered within their specific cultural contexts.

## Chapter Four

### Decoding the Past: Genealogical Narratives in *The Quincunx*

Charles Palliser's *The Quincunx* presents itself as a text to be decoded and interpreted by its readers; it is deliberately constructed as a literary game. Although literary puzzles are usually considered characteristic of postmodern fiction, in *The Quincunx* the intellectual puzzle is specifically related to its nineteenth-century location. In fact, the location of the novel provides the first instance in which the readers are involved in a process of deduction since the novel is reluctant to divulge its precise historical location. The dates of events and ages of characters are never provided directly to the reader, rather the reader has to reconstruct a chronology from the various clues and hints in the narrative. For instance, Mary's writing of her letters in a pocket book is contextualised as 'customary in that time before the Penny Post' (*Q*, 23), indicating that the novel is set before the introduction of the Penny Post in 1840. Such details help to establish a sense of the historical era in which the novel is set yet the historical details often contradict each other. The most pertinent example of this surrounds the question of John's date of birth. Whilst the reader is informed of the date and month, 7<sup>th</sup> February, the year is omitted and has to be deduced from the textual clues embedded in the baptismal record. Yet these clues are contradictory and so the exact date can never be confidently asserted. The significance of the discrepancies in John's baptismal record will be further explored in relation to the novel's treatment of genealogy.

The novel also requires the reader to adopt the role of detective to identify the numerous intertextual allusions to Victorian texts. Reviewers and critics have delighted in playing this game and have identified the Victorian sources for the

various episodes of Palliser's novel, mostly focusing on the allusions to Dickens, although texts by other Victorian authors are also proposed as possible intertexts.<sup>1</sup> In identifying the intertextual echoes to Dickens and Wilkie Collins, the reader is led to the conclusion that *The Quincunx* alludes not merely to specific instances from their novels but also to their genre conventions. Wilkie Collins is generally credited with developing both the genres of sensation and detective fiction in *The Woman in White* (1860) and *The Moonstone* (1868) respectively.<sup>2</sup> Although *The Woman in White* is usually characterised as a sensation novel it is also appropriate to think of it in relation to the development of detective fiction.<sup>3</sup> Scott McCracken relates the development of the detective genre to the establishment of the modern legal system based on evidence, a relationship which is clearly evident in *The Woman in White*. Walter Hartright explicitly draws the reader's attention to the narrative's connection to the legal system in the preamble:

[...] the story here presented will be told by more than one pen, as the story of an offence against the laws is told in Court by more than one witness – with the same object, in both cases, to present the truth always in its most intelligible aspect [...].<sup>4</sup>

The influence of sensation fiction is clearly apparent in *The Quincunx*'s treatment of many of its central themes: illegitimacy, inheritance, insanity, adultery

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<sup>1</sup> See Robert Bernard Martin, 'An underworld without pattern' *TLS* 15 Sept. 1989: 1006. Susana Onega, 'The Symbol Made Text: Charles Palliser's Postmodernist Re-Writing of Dickens in *The Quincunx*,' *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses* 6 (1993): 131-141, 132.

<sup>2</sup> See Robert P. Ashley, 'Wilkie Collins and the Detective Story,' *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 6 (1951): 47-60, 47. See also Scott McCracken, *Pulp: Reading Popular Fiction* (Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 1998) 52; and Stephano Tani, *The Doomed Detective: The Contribution of the Detective Novel to Postmodern American and Italian Fiction* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1984) 17.

<sup>3</sup> As Ashley acknowledges, '[m]ost authorities classify this novel as a mystery rather than as a detective novel, but its resemblance to the latter type is sufficiently strong to justify its classification as a borderline case', 51.

<sup>4</sup> Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*, 1860, ed. and introd. John Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996) 5. See also John Sutherland's Introduction to the novel, which highlights this analogy claiming that 'The novel's technique is forensic, not historical' John Sutherland, 'Introduction,' *The Woman in White*, by Wilkie Collins (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996) xv.



and murder. The co-existence of the conventions of both sensation and detective fiction within both Palliser's novel and its Victorian intertext highlights the inadequacy of attempts to distinguish between these two genres. Indeed, if we accept *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone* as inaugural texts of each genre, sensation and detective fiction emerged during the same decade, the 1860s. Both genres usually hinge on the discovery of a secret or mystery that had threatened the social order. For instance, in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's sensation novel, *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), Robert Audley turns sleuth in an attempt to explain the mysterious disappearance of his friend, George Talboys. This connection between the two genres is certainly evident in *The Quincunx* as the "sensational" plot elements, such as John's incarceration in a lunatic asylum, are prompted by the various attempts to either preserve or expose the central mysteries of the novel.

Detective fiction addresses epistemological questions of what we know about the world and the systems by which we acquire that knowledge. For Brian McHale, epistemology is the dominant in modernist fiction and since detective fiction is 'the epistemological genre *par excellence*' it conforms to a modernist mode of writing.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the golden age of detective fiction coincided with the high point of literary modernism.<sup>6</sup> Yet as I have indicated, the genre of detective fiction was actually inaugurated in the mid-nineteenth century and was popularised as a result of the late-

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<sup>5</sup> Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1996) 9. McHale adopts Jakobson's definition of a dominant as 'the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components', 6.

<sup>6</sup> The golden age of detective fiction is identified as the period of writing from the 1920s and 1930s, 'led by a quartet of writers who are still widely read today: Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, Margery Allingham and Ngaio Marsh [...]', "Detective Fiction," *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* 6<sup>th</sup> Ed., (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000).

nineteenth-century phenomenon of Sherlock Holmes.<sup>7</sup> The emergence of detective fiction in the mid- to late-nineteenth century reflects the social circumstances of the Victorian era, especially the sense of anonymity propagated by the mass migration to towns and cities and the establishment of the Metropolitan Police force in 1829. Yet it is also a response to intellectual currents during the Victorian period in its privileging of the scientific methodology of disciplines such as phrenology and archaeology.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the development of the genre of detective fiction is associated with Victorian concerns with realism.<sup>9</sup> According to Slavoj Žižek detective fiction is concerned with the impossibility of rendering a “realistic” continuity of events in narrative.<sup>10</sup> Yet although detective fiction does highlight the limitations of realism it also reveals an affinity with the forms of the realist novel that came to dominate the literary scene in the Victorian era.

Detective fiction’s obsession with knowing the world is closely allied to the perception that the realist project attempts to fully represent the world to the reader. Indeed, the figure of the detective performs a similar function to that of the omniscient narrator as they elucidate the connections between seemingly random characters and events to present a coherent and contained world. In their adoption of an omniscient narrator, realist narratives suggest that the world is ultimately knowable if only for particularly gifted individuals.<sup>11</sup> Even Ermarth’s replacement

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<sup>7</sup> The impact of this late Victorian detective figure is attested to by virtue of the fact that within the popular imagination as Sherlock Holmes has become a synonym for a detective. See Stephen Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1980) 67.

<sup>8</sup> See Lawrence Frank, *Victorian Detective Fiction and the Nature of Evidence: The Scientific Investigations of Poe, Dickens, and Doyle* (Hampshire: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> Martin Keyman argues that detective fiction is related to three discursive institutions which ‘all rely on a *modern paradigm of realism*’: the law, the classic novel and orthodox science. *From Bow Street to Baker Street: Mystery, Detection and Narrative* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1992) 8.

<sup>10</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (London & Massachusetts: MIT P, 1992) 48-9.

<sup>11</sup> See Knight, 23-24.

of the notion of omniscience in realist narratives with that of consensus maintains this sense as the narrator's 'power of generalization belongs to any witness, to any implied spectator or reflexive consciousness at a certain distance. Such power is not a special privilege of the narrator but merely the condition of consciousness generally [...].'<sup>12</sup>

Detective stories metafictionally reproduce the situation of realist fiction since the detective character replicates the position of the narrator within the text, he interprets the clues and provides the information he has uncovered to the reader. Franco Moretti's discussion of the roles of Watson and Holmes in Conan Doyle's stories elucidates this metafictional element of detective fiction. Moretti distinguishes between 'the extremes of *passive reading* (Watson automatically records events that he does not understand) and of *writing* (Holmes, who narrates the *fabula*, emerges as the true author of the work [...])'.<sup>13</sup> Palliser posits a similar definition of realist narratives in his explanation of the "implied contract" which he claims existed between the reader and the author in Victorian fiction: 'This contract assumes that everything to do with both plot and motivation is eventually explained in full by a narrator or author who is completely trustworthy – however much the reader might have been baffled and teased along the way' ('AA', 1204). According to Palliser, then, a key element of the implied contract of realist fiction is the achievement of closure or resolution by the end of the narrative. This is also a central feature of detective fiction as the entire plot has been preparing for the

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<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, *Realism and Consensus in the English Novel: Time, Space and Narrative* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1998) 67. Sherlock Holmes similarly claims that the deductions he makes are detectable by anyone who will 'observe the small facts upon which large inferences may depend'. 'The Sign of Four', Arthur Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet and The Sign of Four* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1903) 13.

<sup>13</sup> Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms*, trans. Susan Fischer, David Forgacs and David Miller (London: Verso, 1988) 148.

detective's revelation of the mystery.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the events and objects of the detective story only acquire meaning, and become "clues", at the end when the detective retrospectively reconstructs the events of the narrative.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the detective novel relies on the realist mode of narration in order to achieve its resolution.

As a neo-Victorian novel, Palliser's text does not simply reproduce the Victorian form of detective fiction but rather transforms it in response to the intellectual context in which it was written. According to Stephano Tani, detective fiction was 'chosen as the perfect genre to be subverted and "decapitated" (that is, deprived of a solution) by the postmodern imagination' because the British form of the genre epitomised 'fictional order, tightly structured plot, centralization – in other words, all that postmodernism denies'.<sup>16</sup> Whilst I have persistently asserted the need to distinguish neo-Victorian fiction from postmodernism, Tani's account provides a useful means for approaching Palliser's novel in its contention that the detective novel 'was changed radically both in structure and inner significance by the postmodern sensibility', a change which produced what Tani identifies as the anti-detective novel and thus clearly provides an important context within which *The Quincunx* needs to be understood.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Frank refers to this convention of detective fiction as 'the requisite coda [...] the summing up of the case in a coherent narrative organized chronologically and causally with no apparent omissions – with no enigmas, conundrums, or hieroglyphic puzzles unresolved', 202.

<sup>15</sup> Muriel Spark's *The Driver's Seat* provides an interesting commentary on this process as the "criminal" deliberately provides "clues" that she knows will be considered as significant after her death.

<sup>16</sup> Tani, 150.

<sup>17</sup> Tani, xii. The importance of this context for Palliser's novel is apparent in its association with one of the anti-detective novels of which Tani treats, Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*. Indeed, one reviewer remarked of *The Quincunx* that 'this Victorian novel went to college and read too much Umberto Eco, judging by the maps, charts, Latin epigrams, and even typographic ornaments that encode clues of a sort.' Michael Bove, 'Delmonas and *The Quincunx* proves aesthetics all their own,' *The Tech*, 110.19 (April 1990): 8. Rev. of *The Quincunx*, by Charles Palliser. <http://www-tech.mit.edu/V110/N19/two.19a.html>.



The postmodern response to the implied contract of realist fiction is to assert the imaginary nature of this external body of knowledge since there can be no knowledge pertaining to the novel outside the confines of the novel itself. Whilst not reducible to the category of postmodern literature, Palliser's novel partakes of this attitude and is deliberately constructed to breach the implied contract of realism. Palliser breaches this contract by refusing to solve the central mysteries of the novel: the question of John's paternity and the identity of the murderer. In addition, throughout the novel there are numerous other unsolved mysteries, for example, the paternity of Henrietta's unborn child, Martin Fortisquince's paternity and the Digweeds' relationship to John.<sup>18</sup> This refusal of closure is considered characteristic of postmodern fiction generally and especially of the postmodern detective novel, or rather anti-detective novel, as theorised by Stephano Tani.

Tani identifies several approaches towards resolution adopted in anti-detective fiction: '[...] the anti-detective novelist [...] anticipates the solution in the narrative sequence [...], fulfils it only partially [...], denies it [...], nullifies it [...], or parodies it [...]'.<sup>19</sup> As he explains in the 'Author's Afterword', Palliser's strategy is to provide 'not so much an inadequacy of explanation as a redundancy, [...] there is a perfectly plausible explanation offered at the most obvious level, but there is a second and equally plausible one that is left implicit' ('AA', 1204). Detective fiction is transformed in *The Quincunx* not through a denial of closure but through an excess. Thus Palliser's novel is not an anti-detective novel of the type Tani identifies but rather is a more complex combination of postmodern and Victorian approaches towards detective fiction; it inhabits both the Victorian modes of realist and detective

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<sup>18</sup> In the 'Author's Afterword', Palliser claims that the narrative allows for the possibility that the Digweeds and John are blood relations ('AA', 1214).

<sup>19</sup> Tani, 41-42.



fiction and the postmodern genre of detective fiction whilst preventing the reader from fully participating in any. Initially, *The Quincunx* appears to adopt the conventions of both realist and detective fiction by gradually providing the reader with information which, it is presumed, will eventually lead to the resolution of the mysteries. It soon becomes apparent, however, that a neat resolution is not going to be provided and *The Quincunx* transforms these conventions by providing an excess of information. Similarly, *The Quincunx* appears to conform to postmodern conventions of refusing closure yet it is never completely denied as the excess of possibilities still allows the reader to impose a resolution on the novel.

If we return to the terms of Eco and Byatt's models, as examined in the previous chapter, the ending of *The Quincunx* demonstrates the inadequacy of such models for neo-Victorian fiction. Palliser's novel initially appears to be an "open" text characterised by indeterminacy and playfulness in the excess of possibilities it allows for. Both Byatt and Eco claim that such "open" texts are actually restrictive since the reader's freedom is limited by the options set out in the text. Yet in Palliser's novel, these possibilities are never fully articulated and so the reader's freedom is not entirely restricted. Thus *The Quincunx* would seem to be a "closed" text, which disguises its productive activity in refusing to articulate the various positions. Yet for Byatt and Eco "closed" texts actually promote readerly freedom by providing something fixed and definite against which they can react. Again, then, this is clearly not the case in *The Quincunx* since many of the possibilities remain unarticulated in the novel.

Palliser's novel also transforms the structural composition of detective fiction. Most detective stories incorporate a dual plot: the first plot is concerned with

the crime or mystery, whereas the second plot presents the process through which the detective figure resolves the mystery within the novel. The sequence of events that constitutes the crime plot usually occurs prior to the beginning of the narrative, and thus exists as an absence which is never directly narrated. Instead, the circumstances of the crime are revealed to the reader in the investigation plot, which commences at the end and ends at the beginning of the crime plot and traces the detective's reconstruction of the circumstances surrounding the crime. In his essay 'The Typology of Detective Fiction' Tzvetan Todorov posits that '[t]he first story ignores the book completely, that is, it never confesses its literary nature [...]. On the other hand, the second story is not only supposed to take the reality of the book into account, but it is precisely the story of that very book'.<sup>20</sup> In detective fiction the reader is driven through the narrative by a desire to have the events they have encountered explained and so the investigation plot, rather than the crime itself, provides the primary narrative focus. Indeed, Palliser argues that this is a condition of all novels which incorporate a plot: 'So we read on not so much because we want to find out what happens next, but rather because we want to find out what has already happened, to make sense of what we have already read' ('AA', 1206).<sup>21</sup>

The mystery in *The Quincunx* concerns the hidden relations that exist between the five families and the method by which the mystery is uncovered, genealogy, is also concerned with the interrelations of families. Therefore, the

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<sup>20</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, New York: Cornell UP, 1984) 45. Todorov's definition of these two plots can be applied to the opposition between history and historicism. History proper, that is the events of the past, is equivalent to the first story whereas historicism is equivalent to the second story since it is the recounting of the historian's engagement with the first story, history. See also Žižek, 58.

<sup>21</sup> Palliser distinguishes between plot and narrative, defining narrative as merely the 'sequence of events happening in the "time present" of the novel', whilst plot is 'a process of development usually involving the characters discovering things but always involving the reader finding out more as the narrative advances' ('AA', 1206).

method of uncovering the mystery is inextricably related to the mystery itself and so the two plots, that of the crime and that of the investigation, coexist producing a transformation of the detective genre. The interrelation of the two plots in *The Quincunx* problematises the notion that detective fiction is primarily concerned with epistemology. In *The Quincunx* epistemological and ontological concerns are inextricably related, the central mystery relates to John's paternity and so his epistemological desire to uncover the mystery is inherently connected to his ontological need for self-identity. Moreover, John's epistemological investigations centre on the construction of his family tree and as such are explicitly implicated in the ontological questions of how his identity is constituted in relation to that of his family.

Finally, *The Quincunx* involves the reader in a process of deduction since the narrative centres around the attempts of the protagonist, John Huffam, to unravel the mysteries surrounding his paternity and the murder of his maternal grandfather. The process of deduction in *The Quincunx* takes the form of a genealogical investigation, a form which Dickens and Collins often implicitly, if not explicitly, address in their construction of plots centred on the legal problems surrounding inheritance and the concomitant issue of illegitimacy, such as *Bleak House* (1852-53) and *No Name* (1862). In *The Quincunx*, the genealogical investigation and the detective genre are inextricably interrelated as John believes that the mysteries surrounding his paternity and the murder of his maternal grandfather are all a result of the decisions taken by his ancestor, Jeoffrey Huffam, concerning the family estate. The interrelations of genealogy and detective fiction are suggested by Maud Bailey's comment that '[...] the classic detective story arose with the classic adultery novel – everyone wanted to

know who was the Father, what was the origin, what is the secret?’ (P, 238).<sup>22</sup> This association between detective fiction and genealogical investigations is exemplified in *The Quincunx* at both a structural as well as thematic level.

Thematically, the narrative replicates the processes of genealogical research as John Huffam attempts to trace his family history, which he reconstructs from the oral accounts of Miss Lydia, Mr Escreet, Miss Quilliam, Francis Nolloth and the local myths related by Mrs Belflower. He also relies on written accounts such as parish records of baptisms (his own) and marriages (James Huffam’s and Eliza Umphraville’s), legal documents (especially the wills and codicils of Jeoffrey Huffam) and his mother’s diary. The narrative is motivated by John’s attempts to uncover the secrets surrounding his family’s history, instigated as it is by his desire to discover his “true” identity. At a structural level, the products of genealogical research, such as heraldic blazons and family trees, provide a key to the novel’s organisation. As a neo-Victorian novel, *The Quincunx*’s interest with genealogy cannot be dissociated from its engagement with the nineteenth century.

### **Genealogy in the Nineteenth Century**

Although genealogy is not peculiar to the nineteenth century it became endowed with particular significance during that period. Many families recorded their immediate family histories by noting the births, marriages, and deaths of their children in their family bible. Indeed, in George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* (1860)

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<sup>22</sup> Clearly this is a meta-fictional comment on *Possession* itself which is also related to the detective genre. Moreover, the integration of the detective elements with the genealogical investigations that occur in *The Quincunx* is also present in *Possession* as Maud and Roland’s discoveries uncover the true parentage of Maia Bailey, Maud’s great-great-great-grandmother.



Mr Tulliver has Tom inscribe a curse against Wakem in their family bible.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, intellectual society's interest in genealogy is evident in the publication of periodicals devoted to the subject.<sup>24</sup>

Genealogy had a functional role within nineteenth-century society as it was the means of establishing legitimacy, upon which inheritance systems depended. Since illegitimacy acquired a social stigma in this period the identification of the father became an important signifier of cultural acceptability.<sup>25</sup> A complete genealogical record was only available to the aristocracy and was preserved not only in family trees and heralds but also in Burke's *Peerage*. In the nineteenth century, the introduction of state practices for documenting the individual, such as censuses and registers of births, deaths and marriages, extended the ability to trace family history.<sup>26</sup> Such practices have facilitated genealogical research to the extent that it has become a popular amateur hobby, especially since the Internet has increased the accessibility of these documents.<sup>27</sup> Genealogy has become a fashionable pastime in the twentieth century, which is often indulged in with a sense of nostalgia, to the point that the prior social and legal functions it served have been almost completely eradicated. Although produced in the twentieth century, *The Quincunx* does not

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<sup>23</sup> George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. and introd. A. S. Byatt (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979) 281.

<sup>24</sup> For example, John Gough Nichols' periodical *Collectanea topographica & genealogica* was published from 1834 to 1843, was continued by *Topographer and genealogist* between 1846 and 1858, and then by *The Herald and Genealogist* from 1863-1874.

<sup>25</sup> See Jenny Bourne Taylor, 'Representing Illegitimacy in Victorian Culture,' *Victorian Identities: Social and Cultural Formations in Nineteenth-Century Literature*, eds. Ruth Robbins and Julian Wolfreys (Hampshire: Macmillan, 1996) 119-42, 126.

<sup>26</sup> As Wrigley remarks, 'The Victorian age was not the first period in English history of which it can be said that there remains written evidence about every man who then lived. [...] But in the Victorian age the volume of information compiled for every individual mounted fast'. E. A. Wrigley, 'Introduction,' *Nineteenth-Century Society: Essays in the use of quantitative methods for the study of social data*, ed. E. A. Wrigley (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1972) 6.

<sup>27</sup> This growth of amateur genealogy has been traced to the period after 1945. "The Study of History: Genealogy," *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica: Macropaedia*, 1991 ed. The establishment of the National Genealogical Society in 1903 (<http://www.ngsgenealogy.org/>) further illustrates the later development of genealogy as a popular pursuit.



engage with genealogy for nostalgic reasons but rather is interested in the historically specific forms and implications of genealogical practices in the nineteenth century.

The evolutionary theories advanced by Darwin in the mid-nineteenth century contributed to the intellectual interest in the field of genealogy; indeed, the diagrammatic representation of the different species reproduced in Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) closely resembles a pedigree chart. Although Darwin deliberately avoided any discussion of the position of man in relation to his theory, many contemporaries felt anxious at the suggestion that their genealogy could be traced back to primates.<sup>28</sup> As Gilmartin notes, '[t]raditionally, the further back a pedigree can be traced, the more noble it is considered to be. Part of the anxiety over pedigree after Darwin was a haunting sense that a pedigree could possibly be traced back too far [...]'.<sup>29</sup> The anxiety caused by Darwin's revelations produced conflicting responses to genealogy. Whilst for some, genealogy became an exercise fraught with ideological issues, for others it provided a reassuring alternative to Darwin's model; according to Gilmartin 'A concentration upon human pedigree [...] is a comforting project in a Darwinian age'.<sup>30</sup>

The nineteenth century's interest in genealogy is also evident in its literature. Gilmartin's study, *Ancestry and Narrative in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (1998), examines how, in seven Victorian novels, 'the family line/tree, working within the novel's plot, reflects class, regional, racial and national tensions within Britain at the time'.<sup>31</sup> Whilst I am not expressly concerned with the interrelations

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<sup>28</sup> This anxiety prompted the famous confrontation between Huxley and Wilberforce. See J. R. Lucas, 'Wilberforce and Huxley: A Legendary Encounter,' *The Historical Journal* 22.2 (1979): 313-30.

<sup>29</sup> Sophie Gilmartin, *Ancestry and Narrative in Nineteenth-Century British Literature: Blood Relations from Edgeworth to Hardy* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998) 17-18.

<sup>30</sup> Gilmartin, 19.

<sup>31</sup> Gilmartin, 3.

between family, class, race and nation, I intend to pause briefly to consider one of the Victorian novels treated in Gilmartin's study: Disraeli's *Sybil: or, The Two Nations* (1845).<sup>32</sup> In the chapter devoted to Disraeli's novel, Gilmartin contemplates 'the family tree *as* fiction', arguing that this is the view Disraeli expresses within the novel since '[h]is fictional creation, Baptist Hatton, is capable of revising history by re-introducing or even "fictionalizing" the genealogies with which he works'.<sup>33</sup> Thus, both *Sybil* and Gilmartin's study reveal the extent to which the supposedly historical enterprise of genealogy is implicated in fictional practices. Yet as Gilmartin concedes, the restitution of *Sybil* to her proper station in life at the end of the novel implies that for all Baptist Hatton's tampering there is such a thing as a "true" and "authentic" genealogy.

Although there is no comparable figure to the professional genealogist in *The Quincunx*, Gilmartin's comments are equally applicable to Palliser's novel. John reconstructs his family history by combining the various accounts he hears throughout the course of the novel. Moreover, the presentation of events is affected by the imposition of John's interpretation of them; it is he alone who decides the ordering principle that will govern the reconstruction of his family tree. The family tree presented at the end of the novel reflects John's decisions; since Henry Huffam is the originating figure, the Huffam branch of the family is privileged at the expense of the others. Whilst John's construction of his family tree resembles Baptist Hatton's fictional genealogies, *The Quincunx* does not retain the confidence that *Sybil* possessed in an authentic genealogy. Rather it declares that a genealogy is

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<sup>32</sup> Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles: A Pure Woman* (1891) is another prominent example of this interest in genealogy as Tess's hardships stem from her father's arrogance on discovering he is connected to the ancient D'Urberville family.

<sup>33</sup> Gilmartin, 3, 114.

always a fictional construct and thus John's version is as valid as any "authorised" genealogy.

Genealogy presents an alternative view of history, representing the private and personal histories of individuals as opposed to the official discourses of public history. Jay Clayton's article 'Dickens and the Genealogy of Postmodernism' (1991) employs the method of genealogy to provide an alternative history, tracing the prehistory of postmodernism to Dickens' fiction. Clayton distinguishes his project of genealogy from a traditional literary history, claiming that 'genealogy seeks to defamiliarize its object, eschews an era's self-representations, and points to what has been left out, what is conspicuous by its absence'.<sup>34</sup> In *The Quincunx* these two aspects of genealogy, as both an alternative to and methodology of official history, combine since John's discoveries are not only made through the process of genealogy but are actually deeply implicated in his family history. That is, the investigation John undertakes reveals genealogy as a methodology of history whilst the results of that investigation, the revelation of suppressed family narratives, provides an alternative to the official narrative encoded in the Huffam family tree. Clayton adopts a genealogical approach to postmodernism in order to reveal 'how what is left out [...] aids in the constitution of this increasingly powerful knowledge'.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, in *The Quincunx* the process of John's genealogical investigations reveals how what is omitted contributes to the constitution of the Victorian ideology of family.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Jay Clayton, 'Dickens and the Genealogy of Postmodernism,' *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 41.2 (1991): 185-95, 181-182.

<sup>35</sup> Clayton, 182.

<sup>36</sup> The construction of the Victorian ideology of family within *The Quincunx* will be discussed in more detail at a later stage of this chapter.

In addition to its status as both an alternative to and a methodology of history, genealogy also contributes to an individual's self-identification. Since the family supplies the first stage in a child's process of socialisation it is not surprising that before they can comprehend their position within society at large they need to comprehend their role and position within the microcosm of society, the family. During the nineteenth century, state practices for the identification of individuals underwent a series of transformations, the most significant of which was the introduction of the census. Although a census had been proposed numerous times during the eighteenth century it was not implemented until 1801.<sup>37</sup> Jane Caplan and John Torpey's consideration of state practices for documenting individuals in the modern world provides some illumination on the motivation for the introduction of censuses in the nineteenth century. They argue that 'Registration and documentation of individual identity are essential if persons are to "count" in a world increasingly distant from the face-to-face encounters characteristic of less complex societies'.<sup>38</sup> The massive population rise and urban migration in the nineteenth century made it increasingly necessary, and increasingly difficult, for the state to account for its citizens. From its inception in 1801 until 1831 there were few variations in either the methods of obtaining information or the type of information sought in censuses. From 1841, however, the nature of the census altered dramatically and this remained the model for subsequent censuses.<sup>39</sup> The foremost change in 1841 was that the census was conducted by the Office of the Registrar General, which had been

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<sup>37</sup> See D. V. Glass, *Numbering the People: The Eighteenth-Century Population Controversy and the Development of Census and Vital Statistics in Britain* (Hants: D. C. Heath Ltd, 1973).

<sup>38</sup> Jane Caplan and John Torpey, 'Introduction,' *Documenting Individual Identity: the development of state practices in the modern world*, eds. Jane Caplan and John Torpey (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton UP, 2001) 6.

<sup>39</sup> Richard Lawton refers to the 1841 census as 'the first full-scale "modern" British census'. 'Introduction,' *The Census and Social Structure: An Interpretative Guide to Nineteenth Century Censuses for England and Wales*, ed. Richard Lawton (London: Frank Cass, 1978) 1.



established in England and Wales in consequence of the 1836 Act for the civil registration of births, deaths and marriages. Another procedural change instigated in 1841 was the distribution of standard printed household schedules, which were to be completed by the head of the house on the specified census day. Obviously, such a system presumes mass literacy and is dependent upon the co-operation of the citizens. In addition to changes in procedure, the 1841 census extended the range of information requested from individuals to include the age and sex of the members of the household, their places of birth and their occupation.<sup>40</sup> As this list illustrates, the 1841 census required individuals to identify themselves in terms of their status and function within society; an individual's identity was conceived in terms of what they could contribute to society and their relation to other members of that society.

In the nineteenth century, then, there were two official modes of identification: the genealogical chart and the census. These two modes, however, were complementary, rather than opposed; the census provided a synchronic account of the individual's position in relation to society at a given moment in history whilst the genealogical chart provided a diachronic account of the individual's relationship to past generations. The ability to define individuals and their relation to others is essential not only for modern states but also for the individual's own sense of self. Genealogies, censuses and other such forms of identification, however, can also threaten the individual's sense of self. That is to say, the identity of the individual as individual, as unique, is threatened by absorption into the category of the family or one of the statistical categories used in the census. As Caplan observes 'The term *identity*, [...] incorporates the tension between "identity" as the *self-same*, in an

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<sup>40</sup> See Lawton, 1.



individualizing, subjective sense, and “identity” as *sameness with another*, in a classifying, objective sense’.<sup>41</sup> This threat of the absorption of the individual will be considered in relation to the role of the family in *The Quincunx*, especially in relation to the transference of names along the genealogical lines of descent.

### **Genealogical Narratives in *The Quincunx***

The novel’s thematic focus on genealogy is signalled in its subtitle: *The Inheritance of John Huffam*. Whilst the identification of the hero suggests the novel’s focus on an individual, the incorporation of the term “inheritance” explicitly connects that individual to his ancestors. As with so much else in Palliser’s novel, however, the subtitle is deliberately ambiguous; the term inheritance itself has a dual meaning referring both to that which is inherited and the process of inheriting. Moreover, that which is inherited can vary, from possessions, such as wealth or lands, to abstract qualities, such as titles or physical and psychological characteristics. The dual meaning of inheritance, in both the subtitle and the narrative, contributes to and stems from the novel’s deliberate excess of meaning.

The ambiguity of the subtitle is further complicated by the presence of two characters named John Huffam. The hero shares the name John Huffam, which is only one of many names he assumes in the novel, with his maternal grandfather. Thus, the subtitle refers to the estate the elder John Huffam was meant to inherit from his grandfather (Jeoffrey Huffam) as well as to the estate the hero is meant to inherit from his maternal grandfather (John Huffam). The question of which John Huffam is referred to in the subtitle raises the issue of the relationship of the individual to the family, which should be interpreted in the context of mid-

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<sup>41</sup> Jane Caplan, “‘This or That Particular Person’: Protocols of Identification in Nineteenth-Century Europe,” *Documenting Individual Identity*, eds. Jane Caplan and John Torpey, 51.

nineteenth-century anxieties prompted by Darwin's theory of evolution. According to Darwin's model the individual is sacrificed at the expense of the species, and the same process seems to occur in *The Quincunx* as the individual's needs and desires are in danger of being subsumed into those of the family. Thus, for example, Henrietta Palphramond is taken in by the Mompessons to ensure the preservation of their interest in the estate by marrying Henrietta, the Palphramond heir, to their son Tom.

An individual's sense of identity usually rests on a belief in their uniqueness, which is often demonstrated with reference to their possession of a unique name. Names, however, also establish a collective, family identity since the transmission of names down the generations designates genealogical relations. As I have already said, in bearing his maternal grandfather's name the hero's individual identity is subsumed into a family identity. Yet the assumption of the surname Huffam actually represents a disruption of genealogical descent since the system of inherited surnames in England is based upon patrilineal rather than matrilineal descent. By conferring her father's name on her son Mary circumvents the issue of John's paternity, which remains a mystery throughout the novel. Thus, John is excluded from the patrilineal system of naming as his mother refuses to inform him of his patronym, his 'true name'. Yet the subtle suggestion in the novel that Mary's father may also be the father of her child further complicates the issue of surnames, suggesting that Huffam is John's patronym and so rendering the distinction between patronym and matronym redundant.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> On the suggestion of an incestuous relationship between Mary and her father see Susan Onega, 'Mirror Games and Hidden Narratives in *The Quincunx*', *Theme Parks, Rainforests and Sprouting Wastelands: European Essays on Theory and Performance in Contemporary British Fiction*, eds. Richard Todd and Luisa Flora (Rodopi, Amsterdam, 2000) 151-63, 161-62.

Similarly, Henrietta's full name, 'Henrietta Louisa Amelia Lydia Hougham Palphramond' (Q, 70) announces her connection to her ancestors. As she explains to John: "'My mother was called Louisa, and Henrietta and Lydia are for my great-aunts'" (Q, 70). Henrietta's names belong to the oral tradition of genealogy in which the Christian name of the father is adopted by the son. Yet in Henrietta's case it preserves a matrilineal heritage in opposition to the masculine version authorised by the Huffam family tree. Henrietta's names announce the fictional nature of genealogy by revealing that they are constructed on the assumption of the primacy of the male line. The subversive potential of the preservation of a female heritage in Henrietta's names is contained, literally, within the male tradition. Henrietta's Christian name derives from the founding father of the Huffam family, Henry Huffam. Moreover, the two "family" names Henrietta bears, Hougham and Palphramond, clearly inscribe her within the patriarchal tradition in which the male's surname is adopted by the female upon marriage.

The official genealogy preserved through the transmission of surnames and family trees only records the history of the male members of the family whilst effacing that of the females. Focusing on the female figures of the Huffam family, therefore, reveals the fictional nature of all genealogies since they are based on the assumption of the superiority of the male line. The genealogical chart reproduced at the end of *The Quincunx* initially appears to reject the authority and primacy of the patronym as John reconstructs his family history through his mother's line, the Huffam line. Even such a project, however, prioritises the male line since John traces his family tree through his mother's male ancestors. Indeed the matronym itself is not exempt from the patrilineal system since, prior to marriage, the name of

the mother is that of her father.<sup>43</sup> Thus, despite taking Mary as his point of departure, the family tree John constructs actually traces the descent of the patronym Huffam. Moreover, if the suggestion that John's maternal grandfather is also his father is assumed to be correct then the family tree would also be constructed according to the principle of patrilineal descent.

This erasure of female heritage is part of the dominance of the family over the individual, although it is more fraught for the female characters within the novel. The loss of a female's individuality within the family identity is vividly demonstrated through the repetition of events affecting the different generations of female figures. The elopement of Mary and Peter almost immediately after their marriage is foreshadowed in the double elopement of James Huffam with Eliza Umphraville and John Umphraville with Lydia Mompesson.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, the murder of Mary's father on the night of her wedding is paralleled in the murder of John Umphraville prior to his marriage to Lydia, a parallel which becomes even more striking with the possibility that Mr Escreet is responsible for both deaths. Similarly, both Lydia's and Mary's plots foreshadow the fate of Henrietta as her elopement is thwarted by the arrival of an opponent to the marriage, who kills the groom before the ceremony can occur. Thus, the female characters within the novel appear to lack any individual identity and are fated merely to re-enact the plots instigated by their ancestors.

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<sup>43</sup> See Marie Maclean, *The Name of the Mother: Writing Illegitimacy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994) 3.

<sup>44</sup> In generational terms, the events of Lydia's elopement occur before those of Mary's marriage, yet they are only presented to the reader after several versions of the events surrounding Mary's marriage have been narrated. This replicates the processes of both genealogical and detective investigations since the genealogist, and detective, usually begin from the present and work backwards. Yet this process is disrupted in *The Quincunx* as despite being part of the present generation, the account of Henrietta's elopement is narrated to the reader only after those of Mary and Lydia.



Tracing these connections between the female characters reveals the fictional nature of the genealogical tree constructed along patriarchal lines. For instance, Eliza Umphraville only appears on the Huffam family tree in relation to her husband, James Huffam, her own family history is almost completely omitted, along with her illicit relationship with Hugo Mompesson. This focus on the repeated omissions of the female characters highlights the absences which are constitutive of genealogies and challenges the “official” versions of the Huffam family history. The identification of these suppressed female narratives demands a reinterpretation of events in light of the pattern they reveal. Thus Mary’s motives for marrying Peter Clothier should be reconsidered in light of the suggestions that both Eliza and Henrietta plan to marry to legitimate their unborn children. Whoever the paternity of Mary’s child is attributed to, it is plausible that her father approves the marriage to Peter Clothier to prevent her being disgraced. Peter Clothier’s own conviction that no child was born of his marriage to Mary, not to mention the physical obstacles raised by the circumstances surrounding their wedding-night, renders it unlikely that Mary’s husband is the father of her child. If this is the case then the genealogical chart serves to “legitimise” John since the only male connected to Mary is Peter, implying that he is the father. Yet unlike the other married couples in the tree, Mary and Peter’s names are not placed above each other but rather are adjacent and so the possibility of John’s illegitimacy is actually subtly inscribed into the “official” record.

The unrecorded narratives of these women have implications for the construction of the Huffam family identity, which is revealed as replete with secrets, arranged marriages, murders and illegitimate children. Palliser deliberately admits



these secrets into the narrative in order to ‘disrupt the unruffled and seamless surface that Victorian public ideology – like any ideology – tries to present’ (‘AA’, 1204). The revelations presented in the novel strike at the heart of the Victorian ideology of the family. This relates back to Clayton’s definition of genealogy since it reveals the extent to which this ideology is constituted by its absences. Palliser’s motivation for this disruption can be elucidated by his claim that such an ideology has survived into our own century. As proof of this he refers to ‘the fact that the sexual abuse of a child by its parent is the unspeakable offence which our own society has only just begun to be able to talk about’ (‘AA’, 1204). Palliser’s reference to sexual abuse as the “unspeakable offence” within the family unit raises the possibility that John Huffam’s maternal grandfather is also his father. It could also be argued that Palliser is suggesting the extent to which Victorian fiction is constituted by its absences, especially in terms of any discussion of sexual relations. Although there have been several studies of the incestuous undertones in the brother-sister relationships in much Victorian fiction, the actual presentation of an incestuous relationship was inconceivable for Victorian novelists, even in sensation fiction.<sup>45</sup> In challenging the notion of Victorian family values Palliser, and Byatt in her depictions of incest in ‘Morpho Eugenia’ and an extra-marital relationship in *Possession*, are responding to Thatcher’s political deployment of “Victorian Values” in the 1980s.<sup>46</sup> In *Possession* Christabel and Randolph’s child is brought up within the socially legitimate family of her sister since, as Euan states, “illegitimate children couldn’t inherit at that time.

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<sup>45</sup> See Walter Kendrick ‘Fiction in Review’ Rev. of *Angels and Insects* by A. S. Byatt, *Yale Review* 81.4 (Oct 1993): 137. For a discussion of incest in nineteenth-century fiction see Robert M. Polhemus, *Erotic Faith: Being in Love From Jane Austen to D. H. Lawrence* (Chicago, London: U of Chicago Pm 1990) which has chapters on *Great Expectations*, *Wuthering Heights* and *The Mill on the Floss*.

<sup>46</sup> See the discussion in the Introduction.

[...Yet,] Victorian families often looked after bastards in this way, hiding them in legitimate families to give them a decent chance” (P, 503). *The Quincunx* similarly proposes this method of suppressing a child’s illegitimacy by incorporating them within a legitimate family, often using supposedly official records to legitimate the narrative that is deemed most acceptable.

In addition to its involvement with genealogy, Palliser’s novel engages with the official modes for determining identity established in the nineteenth century through the introduction of censuses and civil records. The family history presented in *The Quincunx* is based on official records of births, marriages and deaths. The secrets that are uncovered in the course of the narrative, and that remain suppressed in the family tree, reveal the inadequacy of such official records in accounting for the complex relationships of the five families. For instance, Lydia’s branch of the family is amputated on the family tree by her decision not to marry, yet this conceals her previous engagement. Similarly, the illicit relationship between Hugo Mompesson and Eliza Umphraville is cancelled out by the marriage of Eliza to James Huffam, suppressing the possibility that John Huffam senior is the child of Hugo Mompesson.<sup>47</sup> The novel’s concern with this mode of documenting identity is evident in the significance to the plot of two such official documents: John’s baptismal record and the marriage certificate of James and Eliza Huffam. James and Eliza’s marriage certificate is needed by law to prove the legitimacy of their child, John Huffam senior. A similar need prompts the search for John’s baptismal record, the discovery of which foregrounds the issues pertaining to both documents.

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<sup>47</sup> See Diagram 1, ‘Huffam Family Tree’, at the end of this Chapter, in which these hidden narratives are indicated on the “official” family tree.

The date of John's baptism is also highly significant. Using the textual evidence provided in John's baptismal record, which refers to the capture of Ciudad Roderique, Onega identifies John's birth date as 7<sup>th</sup> February 1812, concluding that Palliser deliberately connects his hero to Charles Dickens since John Huffam not only shares a birthday with, but also the middle names of, the Victorian author.<sup>48</sup> Yet the date of John's baptism is pertinent to more than just a connection between the hero and Charles Dickens. Onega's eagerness to establish this connection causes her to overlook the ambiguity encoded in the passage. On being provided with the details of John's birth date the vestry-clerk replies "“Why then, that was the first year we had to keep separate registers for baptisms, marriages and deaths under Sir George Rose's Act. So I'll wager yours will be one of the first entries”" (*Q*, 508). Thus, John's baptismal record highlights the introduction of new civil methods for documenting individuals in the nineteenth century. The identification of this historical fact undermines Onega's definitive assertion that John's year of birth is 1812 as although the Sir George Rose Act was passed in 1812 it did not actually come into force until 1813.<sup>49</sup> Once again, the excess of information allows for multiple interpretations and prevents the imposition of a unifying interpretation.

This excess of information is also evident in the ambiguous phrasing of the baptismal entry: 'Mr Martin Fortisquince godfather and father: Peter Clothier of London' (*Q*, 508). The unusual punctuation of this sentence allows for the interpretation that Martin Fortisquince is both the godfather and father, as well as the possibility that Peter Clothier is the father. Indeed, the clerk's recollection of the entry further complicates the issue. He recalls:

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<sup>48</sup> Onega, 'The Symbol Made Text' 131-132.

<sup>49</sup> Glass, 118.

How it happened was, I wrote it down to “godfather” and when I pointed out to your mother that I should record the name of the child’s father and his parish of settlement, Mr Fortisquince it was who added the words “and father” and then they looked at each other. [...] And then she took the quill from him and added “Peter Clothier of London”. But she would not give his parish. (*Q*, 508).

Thus, the official documents that were intended to guarantee an individual’s identity are shown to be subject to distortion and omission and so can actually conceal it.

### **Excessive Illegitimacy?**

As I have been arguing, *The Quincunx* reveals that genealogy is a fictional account of a family’s history, constructed as much by what is suppressed as by what is incorporated. Perhaps the most significant omission from the Huffam genealogy is the suppression of the illegitimacy of several figures. As a neo-Victorian novel, the treatment of illegitimacy needs to be located within its nineteenth-century context. Jenny Taylor posits that there was a transition in the meaning of illegitimacy in the nineteenth century: ‘[t]he shame of illegitimacy is internalised to a greater degree, as the illegitimate child is doubly perceived as both bearing and being the mother’s “mark of shame” [...]’.<sup>50</sup> Taylor’s reference to the shame that surrounded illegitimacy indicates the moral import of the issue at that time. It also, however, had a legal significance since illegitimate children were considered to be “nobody’s child” and hence could not inherit.<sup>51</sup> The prevalence of the illegitimate child within Victorian fiction, and the variations between the presentations of illegitimate children and fallen women, testifies to the contentious nature of the issue within nineteenth-century society. For my purposes, though, I am interested in the ways in which these novels resolve the issue of illegitimacy in their conclusions.

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<sup>50</sup> Bourne Taylor, ‘Representing Illegitimacy,’ 126.

<sup>51</sup> See Jenny Bourne Taylor, ‘Nobody’s Secret: Illegitimate Inheritance and the Uncertainties of Memory,’ *Memory, 1789-1914*, spec. issue of *Nineteenth Century Contexts* 21 (2000): 565-92.



Illegitimate children were often used by Victorian authors as ‘devices of melodrama and sources of narrative suspense [...]’.<sup>52</sup> The suspense is created by the reader’s desire to discover the identity of the child’s father and is usually satiated by the revelation of the father’s identity at the end of the novel, restoring the social stability of the family. In George Eliot’s *Silas Marner* (1861) it is eventually revealed that Eppie’s father is the local squire’s son, yet the social order is not restored as Eppie radically decides to live with her adopted, rather than blood, father. In Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* the uncanny resemblance between Laura Fairlie and Anne Catherick is subsequently revealed to be a natural genetic occurrence since they share a father. The focus on the revelation of a concealed paternity reflects the physical circumstances of illegitimacy since *pater semper incertus est*.<sup>53</sup> In *Bleak House*, Dickens’ treatment of the illegitimate Esther Summerson diverges from the conventional presentation. The identities of both of Esther’s parents remain a mystery for most of the narrative and, in fact, it is the identity of the mother with which Dickens is most concerned. Dickens’s focus on the mother rather than the father is emphasised by the revelation that Esther’s father is the law-clerk Nemo, literally nobody, whilst her mother is revealed to be Lady Dedlock, a woman of high social standing.

As a neo-Victorian text, Palliser’s novel engages with the Victorian convention of the illegitimate child through the strategy of repetition with a difference. *The Quincunx* initially appears to adopt the Victorian convention in its focus on a character whose paternity is revealed to be in doubt. It soon becomes apparent, however, that the hero of the novel is not the only illegitimate child within

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<sup>52</sup> Taylor, ‘Representing Illegitimacy’ 121.

<sup>53</sup> Sigmund Freud, ‘Family Romances,’ *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, vol. 9 (London: Hogarth Press, 1959): 235-41, 239.



the narrative. The novel also raises the possibility that John Huffam senior, Martin Fortisquince, Mr Escreet and Henrietta's unborn child are all illegitimate.<sup>54</sup> As with the implied contract of the realist novel, Palliser breaches the Victorian convention of illegitimacy by providing an excess of instances, what he terms a 'redundancy' ('AA', 1204). *The Quincunx* further transforms the Victorian convention in its denial of a resolution to the issue of John's paternity, again through this strategy of redundancy. Rather than merely refusing to identify John's father, Palliser provides the reader with at least three equally plausible candidates: Peter Clothier, Martin Fortisquince and John Huffam senior. Thus, as with its relationship to the Victorian narrative strategies of both detective and realist fiction, Palliser's transformation of the Victorian convention of illegitimacy is achieved by an excess of information.

The portrayal of family relations in *The Quincunx* refuses to conform to well-known theories of the family, such as Freud's. As Marie Maclean demonstrates in her study of illegitimacy, Freud's "family romance" needs to be reconceptualised to account for the experience of illegitimate children: '[t]he bastard does not need to fantasise a missing father: he already exists'.<sup>55</sup> Yet even Maclean's account is problematised by John's case since it is never clear whether or not John, or the other seemingly illegitimate figures within the novel, are in fact illegitimate. Maclean's theory of legitimation and delegitimation, however, provides a useful means for considering John's relation to his patronym. Maclean argues that delegitimation is an important process for the illegitimate and 'may involve publicly laying claim to actual illegitimacy [... or] the proclamation of a symbolic illegitimacy by public

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<sup>54</sup> The suggestion is that Mr Escreet is the illegitimate son of Jeoffrey Huffam and Anna Mompesson whilst Martin Fortisquince is possibly the illegitimate son of Mr Escreet.

<sup>55</sup> Maclean, 41.

rejection of the father's name, the father's values, or both'.<sup>56</sup> John's assumption of the surname "Huffam" at the end of the narrative seems to operate as a process of delegitimation since it is his mother's maiden name rather than his own patronym. Yet the assumption of the name Huffam could also be reconfigured as a process of legitimation since the novel suggests the possibility that the father of Mary's child is her own father, and thus Huffam would be both John's patronym and matronym. Lydia informs John that he is actually named after John Umphrville, his great-grandmother's brother. Lydia's account further problematises John's assumption of Huffam as the correct surname since it proposes the possibility of an illicit relationship between Hugo Mompesson and Eliza Umphrville, resulting in the possible bastardy of the first John Huffam. If this is the case, then, even if the suggestion of incest between Mary and her father is correct, the hero of the novel is a Mompesson since his grandfather, the first John Huffam, was actually a Mompesson by blood.

John's relationship with his parents is further complicated by his mother's assumption of a pseudonym. At the outset of the narrative John believes that his name is Mellamphy and that he never had a father. After an encounter with a vagabond who assures him that everyone has a father, John begins to question his mother about his own father. This prompts Mary to remember her father, causing confusion as John assumes she is talking about his father (*Q*, 24). The discomfort John's assumption causes Mary provides possible evidence for the conclusion that Mary's father is also John's father. It is at this time that John discovers the information that will provide the basis for his later suspicions regarding his mother's

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<sup>56</sup> Maclean, 6.

name. He sees her reading a letter not addressed to Mrs Mellamphy: 'I had only just begun to learn my letters but I knew that our name began with an "M", [...] I was surprised to see that the name on this smaller epistle began with a different letter – a "C". I could not think of any explanation for this' (*Q*, 24). The significance of the letters can be understood in relation to Lacan's theory of the psychological development of an infant. John embarks on his search to discover the identity of his father at the point when he is leaving behind the Imaginary stage associated with the mother and entering the father's realm of language and culture, the Symbolic. Thus, John's plight would seem to represent a universal stage in the development of an individual's identity. Yet the complex circumstances surrounding John's paternity diverges from such psychological models.

According to Freud's model, the family romance entails a rejection of the natural parents in favour of mythological ones. The situation in *The Quincunx*, however, is reversed. John gradually discovers that his mother's identity is actually an assumed one and it is in order to learn the true identity of his parents that he embarks on the genealogical investigations I have been exploring in this chapter. As I have already said, by rejecting the name of the father an illegitimate child is involved in a process of delegitimation. This is true even if the name subsequently adopted is the mother's maiden name; the matronym is no more natural than the patronym since it is derived from the mother's father.

Again, the situation is more complicated in *The Quincunx* since John's mother rejects the names of both her father and her husband in favour of a pseudonym, Mellamphy, chosen at random (*Q*, 96). John's discovery that the name

he had presumed was his real name is actually an assumed name causes him to question the relationship between names and the things they represent:

Could it be that “Mellamphy” was not our real name? But how could it not be? I was John Mellamphy just as much as the house was a house. How could I have a “real” name that I didn’t know? In that case, was there a real me that went along with it and that I also didn’t know? The very idea was absurd (*Q*, 94).

In the course of the narrative, John recovers from this existential horror at the lack of a connection between his name and his identity and comes to the conclusion that ‘One’s “real” name was surely the name one chose for oneself’ (*Q*, 856).

Throughout the novel, John and his mother adopt a variety of names in order to hide their true identity. This adoption of interchangeable pseudonyms appears to undermine the notion of a true name and thus implicitly reveals the fictional nature of any genealogical project based on such fictions as names. Yet John retains a belief in the notion of a true name and, despite supposedly embracing the fictional nature of narratives, he remains eager to discover his true identity by resolving the mystery of his paternity. Nevertheless, the narrative that he reconstructs, and the genealogical tree which represents it, is constructed around his mother’s maiden name.

### **An Heraldic Structure**

In her study *Ancestry and Narrative in Nineteenth-Century British Literature*, Sophie Gilmartin compares family trees to fictional narratives, arguing that ‘[i]n fiction, and especially in the novel, plots and subplots contend, like the greater and lesser branches of a family tree or different versions of history, for supremacy’.<sup>57</sup> This analogous relationship between fiction and genealogy is even more apparent in

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<sup>57</sup> Gilmartin, 114.

*The Quincunx*, which enacts at a structural level its thematic concern with genealogical processes. The novel is divided into five parts, each focusing on a different branch of the family, and constructs a family tree in the successive additions made to the genealogical charts at the end of each part. The structural organisation of the novel implies that each branch of the family can be considered in isolation since each Part bears the name of the family they supposedly depict, yet the narrative reveals that they are all inextricably intertwined. This is forcibly demonstrated in each of the families' adoption of a quincunx as their heraldic symbol. Each quincunx is a variant on the "original" Iuffam quincunx and indeed only makes sense in relation to the other variants. Moreover, the family trees presented at the end of each part gradually grow to incorporate the relations between the five branches of the family. As the families combine to form one complex family tree, the heraldry combines to form a quincunx of quincunxes which is actually the key to the book.<sup>58</sup> The direct correlation between the form of the family tree and heraldry and the novel's structural composition suggests that the pattern presented is the natural pattern for both the novel and the genealogical tree. Genealogy, however, is not a neutral practice but rather is deeply implicated in family politics and is ultimately dependent upon the position of the genealogist. Thus, the family tree presented at the end of the novel only represents John's version of the family's history; if another character had undertaken the genealogical investigations the family tree would have taken on an entirely different shape, with the Huffam line not occupying the position of primacy.

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<sup>58</sup> See Diagram 2 'Heraldic Quincunxes', at the end of this chapter.



The arbitrary and fictional nature of a family tree participates in the dialogue *The Quincunx* constructs between design and chance, a dialogue that is most apparent in the novel's structure. Each of the five branches of the Huffam family adopts a variation of the quincunx as part of their heraldic device. When combined, they form a quincunx of quincunxes which provides a diagrammatic model of the novel's structure: the individual family quincunxes represent the five parts of the novel; each quatre-foil designates a book within that part; and the petals and bud represent the chapter divisions within each book. In her article 'Mirror Games and Hidden Narratives in *The Quincunx*', Susan Onega provides a diagram of the novel's structure.<sup>59</sup> In spite of her previous assertion that Palliser's novel is distinguished by its 'hesitation between [...] order and chaos [...]', Onega's account of the structure of *The Quincunx* favours design, as opposed to chance, as the determining principle in the novel.<sup>60</sup> Yet design and chance exist not in opposition but in a dialogic relationship, with neither mode being prioritised. The strategy of redundancy through excess also operates in relation to design since more than one possible design is provided by the novel; thus, the excess of designs undermines the very possibility of there being a fixed and ordered pattern to the novel. The preservation of the role of chance within design is apparent in the choice of the quincunx as the structuring principle for the novel as it is a 'pattern that was both arbitrary and yet fixed [...]' ('AA', 1217). The arrangement of the quincunx of quincunxes provides the key to the novel: literally in that it is the combination to the safe containing the purloined will and metafictionally in that it reflects the novel's narrative structure.

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<sup>59</sup> Onega, 'Mirror Games', 156. Although Onega makes a similar claim in her earlier article 'The Symbol Made Text' (1993) this later article provides a more elaborate account of the structural significance of the novel.

<sup>60</sup> Onega, 'Mirror Games' 151.

The tinctures of the heraldic device provide a key for the narrative composition of the novel. Palliser states that '[...] the three types of narration – John's, the third-person narration and the narratives recounted by characters within the novel – paralleled the colours white, black and red in the design of the quincunx of quincunxes' ('AA', 1218).<sup>61</sup> This design, however, is disrupted by the tinctures of the central quincunx, that adopted by the Clothiers and corresponding to Part Three of the novel. Since the whole of Book Three, Part Three is occupied by Mary's diary account the entire central quatre-foil, including the bud, should be coloured red. Yet when reconstructing the tinctures of the heraldic device to unlock the Mompesson safe, John decides that the central bud of this central quatre-foil is black, reasoning 'It had to be so for the sake of the pattern of the whole' (*Q*, 1030).<sup>62</sup> John's assumption appears to be correct since he is able to unlock the safe. Thus a consideration of the tinctures of the heraldic design contributes to the opposition of design and chance within the novel in the absence of a single, unifying, organising principle. Moreover, it also demonstrates Palliser's principle of an excess of information since both designs are correct at different levels. My discussion of the significance of the novel's patterning rejects a simplistic opposition of design and chance within the novel, since both designs are correct the very possibility of there being a single design is undermined. Whilst the replication of the heraldic quincunx of quincunxes in the novel's structure would suggest a design, the choice of the quincunx as the structuring principle was arrived at through chance. Palliser's denial of an ordering principle is given in the 'Author's Afterword', a statement of the

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<sup>61</sup> Palliser's distinction between the third-person narration and narratives recounted by characters is problematised, as we have seen, by the revelation that the third-person narrative is actually that of Mr Pentecost and Mr Silverlight, who are themselves characters within the novel.

<sup>62</sup> See Diagram 3, 'Coloured Quincunxes', at the end of this chapter.

processes by which the novel was designed. Thus, Palliser's declaration that he arrived at the quincunx through chance is undermined by its appearance in an afterword which asserts the role of the author in the creation of a text. The 'Author's Afterword' explicitly declares the importance of the author whilst simultaneously denying authorial omniscience. Furthermore, it is impossible to approach the 'Author's Afterword' straightforwardly since it appears in conjunction with a text that is so self-consciously interested in playing games with fictional modes.

The excess of designs, which is in fact a redundancy that undermines the very possibility of design, is also evoked in John's genealogical quest. Throughout the novel, John oscillates between asserting and denying the presence of an ordering principle to his life. As the novel progresses John becomes more convinced that there is a pattern behind all the seemingly random coincidences that affect him. In this respect, John comes to inhabit a paranoid mode of thought, a mode that in both clinical and cultural use designates 'a type of interpretation, or over-interpretation, motivated by a will to perceive connection'.<sup>63</sup> John's expansion of this proposed pattern to incorporate all the events that bear upon his life actually undermines the very possibility of there being a pattern since for a pattern to be meaningful there have to be elements which are excluded. The reader is placed in a similar situation since the excess of possible resolutions to the questions of the identity of John's father and his grandfather's murderer, all of which are equally plausible and so conform to John's pattern, undermines the attempts to impose a single design or pattern on the narrative. The quincunx is an appropriate symbol for this since

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<sup>63</sup> Peter Garratt, 'Routine Paranoia: The Fiction of Magnus Mills,' University of Edinburgh Graduate Conference 'Culture and Identity in Theory and Practice', University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh 6 Mar. 2004.

whichever way you look at it, it always makes sense and produces a pattern.<sup>64</sup>

Moreover, the quincunx symbol recalls Robbe-Grillet's *La Jalousie* (1957), one of the few other instances of a quincunx in literature, in which the quincunx symbolises the narrator's paranoia.<sup>65</sup> This significance is extended in Palliser's novel since the quincunx provides the principle to the book's structure, revealing the paranoid nature of reading, in which the reader attempts to discover a coherent pattern connecting all the events portrayed in the novel.<sup>66</sup>

As a neo-Victorian novel, Palliser's engagement with the notion of design needs to be considered in relation to the presence of design and order within Victorian fiction. Indeed, many reviewers and critics have associated the complex and intricate plot of Palliser's novel with those of Collins and Dickens.<sup>67</sup> In Dickens's novels all the minor characters and all of the apparent coincidences that have appeared throughout the narrative are eventually revealed to be significant to the overall design ordering the lives of the central characters. The suggestion of a design and order to the world being presented is considered characteristic of much Victorian realist fiction and thus the dialogue between chance and design in Palliser's novel is also a comment on Victorian realism.<sup>68</sup> The metafictional remarks in *The Quincunx* make this commentary explicit, as Emma Porteous notes 'It's the sort of thing that you expect to find only in a novel – and only when you know the

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<sup>64</sup> As the epigram to the novel reads: 'What fairer sight is there than the quincunx, which presents itself as a straight line from whichever angle you view it'. Translated by Roy Pinkerton, Edinburgh University.

<sup>65</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, *La Jalousie*, (1957) trans. Richard Howard (London: John Calder, 1997).

<sup>66</sup> Garratt sees this as a position the reader shares with the critic, 'Routine Paranoia'.

<sup>67</sup> See Allan Massie, 'An Astonishing Imitation of Life,' rev. of *The Quincunx: The Inheritance of John Huffam*, by Charles Palliser, *The Scotsman, Weekend Style* 30 Sept. 1989: 7.

<sup>68</sup> Garratt claims that the classic realist novel is close in spirit to 'the essential inclusiveness of the paranoid mode, depicting the panoramic totality of the real within a single, consistent representational plane. Its enforcement of pattern and its aversion to contingency lend it a kind of paranoid purpose [...]', 'Routine Paranoia'. See also Thomas Vargish, *The Providential Aesthetic in Victorian Fiction* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1985).



author has been too idle to work it out any better' (*Q*, 738). Emma's comment raises a recurrent criticism of Victorian realism in the suggestion that coincidences are employed to resolve plot difficulties. As Vargish notes, however, '[i]n the providential aesthetic [...] coincidence is not necessarily a failure in realism or [...] a cheap way out of difficulties in plot and structure [...]. They signal a purposiveness beyond the natural accident'.<sup>69</sup> John's reaction to Emma's comments subscribes to this notion of an order: 'Coincidence? No, I could not believe that. If there was an Author arranging my life, I could not think so ill of him' (*Q*, 738). Once again, then, Palliser's response to the conventions of Victorian literature is that of deliberate redundancy. In providing an excess of design Palliser disrupts the confident belief in a governing design to fiction, revealing the realism of Dickens as that of a paranoid who insists on finding meaning and connections in everything.

### **Narrative Resolution**

As I have said, *The Quincunx* resembles the genre of detective fiction in its gradual revelation, to both the reader and John, of some of the secrets surrounding the five families. Rather than definitively solving the mysteries, the narrative, in its deliberate ambiguity and its adoption of the strategy of redundancy, allows for multiple interpretations. Once again, the narrative is analogous to the design of the quincunx from which it derives its title and organising principle. This is applicable to the mysteries within the narrative since the reader can find evidence to corroborate whichever version they choose from among the various interpretations that are allowed for within the narrative. Moreover, as I have shown, the family tree constructed by John is determined by his own position and thus if the family

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<sup>69</sup> Vargish, 9-10.



narratives were approached from the perspective of one of the supposedly minor branches of the family, the mysteries might be explained in an entirely different way. The resulting family tree would certainly look very different.

In addition to John's deliberate suppression of information, the resolution of the novel's mysteries is hindered by its conclusion. The sensation novels of the 1860s, which *The Quincunx* echoes, almost invariably conclude with the resolution of the crimes or mysteries it has presented and the punishment of the perpetrators. For instance, in *Lady Audley's Secret*, Lady Audley's acts of bigamy and murder are eventually uncovered and she dies alone incarcerated in a lunatic asylum. Whilst the criminals in *The Woman in White* are never brought to trial, the reader is meant to interpret their fates (Sir Glyde's death in a fire and Count Fosco's death at the hands of foreign spies) as evidence of divine justice. At the end of *The Quincunx*, however, the situation is more ambiguous. Towards the end of the novel, both the reader and John are presented with seemingly incontrovertible proof of the identity of John Huffam's murderer in the re-enactment of the murder scene by Mr Escreet. Yet Mrs Fortisquince's subsequent denunciation of responsibility problematises this interpretation: "I did not mean it," [...] "I only intended to goad him into giving us the will" (*Q*, 1167). John's confused reaction articulates the reader's own inability to elucidate the meaning of Mrs Fortisquince's comments: 'What was she saying? Simply that she had not meant this to happen? Or that she had made her story up? Or had merely guessed at what she had not seen? There was no time to ponder these things now' (*Q*, 1167). Indeed, neither John, nor the reader, ever discover the truth of Mrs Fortisquince's words and thus the identity of the murderer remains unresolved.

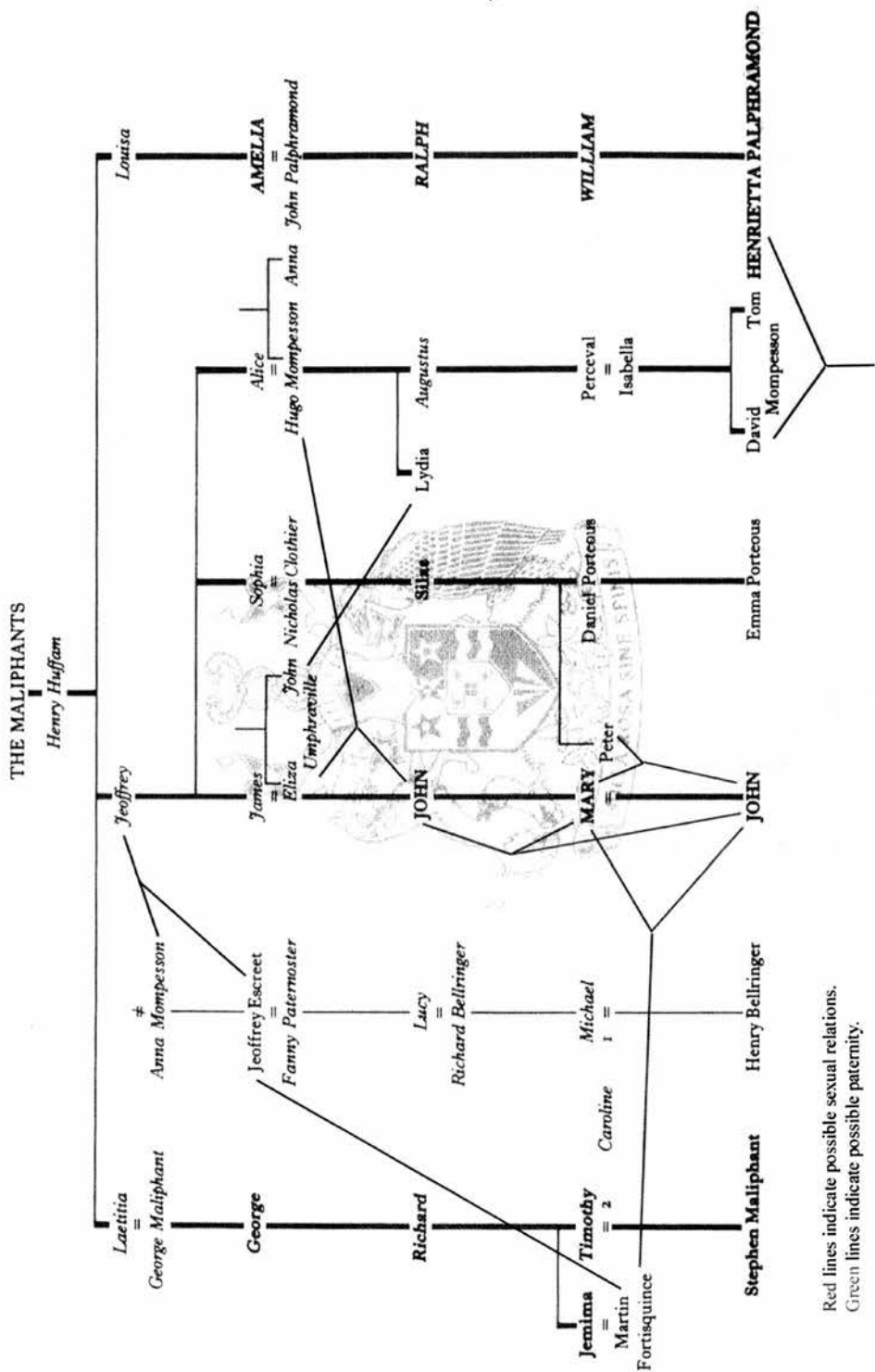
The other major mystery of the novel, the question of John's paternity, is equally brought into doubt by the novel's conclusion. The novel's final sentence challenges the reader's assumptions about the paternity of John in its deliberate ambiguity. John's final sight is of 'the dead stump where Miss Lydia's lover had died by my grandfather's sword' (*Q*, 1191), a sentence which can be interpreted in two ways, depending on whether the term "grandfather" refers to the paternal or maternal grandfather.<sup>70</sup> Both John and the reader have learnt from Miss Lydia's account that it was Mr Escreet who had killed her lover, John Umphraville. If "grandfather" in this sentence is taken to refer to John's maternal grandfather then the sentence confirms this sequence of events, suggesting that Mr Escreet used the sword belonging to John Huffam senior to kill John Umphraville. Yet the ambiguous phrasing of the sentence raises another possibility. The phrase "died by my grandfather's sword" can also mean "killed by my grandfather, who was wielding a sword", suggesting that Mr Escreet is in fact John's paternal grandfather. This possibility concurs with the suggestions in the narrative that Martin Fortisquince was the product of an affair between Martin's mother and Mr Escreet, and that Martin Fortisquince is the father of Mary's child. Again, *The Quincunx* is distinguished from the Victorian forms of sensation and detective fiction in its deliberate refusal to provide resolution or closure at the end of the novel. This refusal of narrative closure is not achieved through a simple denunciation of closure but rather through the strategy of excess; the incorporation of multiple possible

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<sup>70</sup> That Palliser obviously intended this sentence to be ambiguous is evident in the fact that the English term for grandfather does not distinguish between the paternal and maternal relation and his comments on the problems this produced for the novel's translation into Swedish ('AA', 1219, 1221). Onega claims that the last sentence of the novel can only be interpreted as meaning that Mr Escreet is John's grandfather, 'Mirror Games', 158. In imposing this single meaning on the sentence Onega disregards the hesitancy which she had claimed was characteristic of the novel, 'Mirror Games', 151.

explanations and solutions to the novel's mysteries serves to undermine any attempt to impose resolution.

DIAGRAM 1  
Huffam Family Tree



Charles Palliser, *The Quincunx: The Inheritance of John Huffam* (London: Penguin, 1990)

## DIAGRAM 2 Heraldic Quincunxes

PART ONE

THE HUFFAMS



PART TWO

THE MOMPESSENS



PART THREE

THE CLOTHIERS



PART FOUR

THE PALPHRAMONDS



PART FIVE

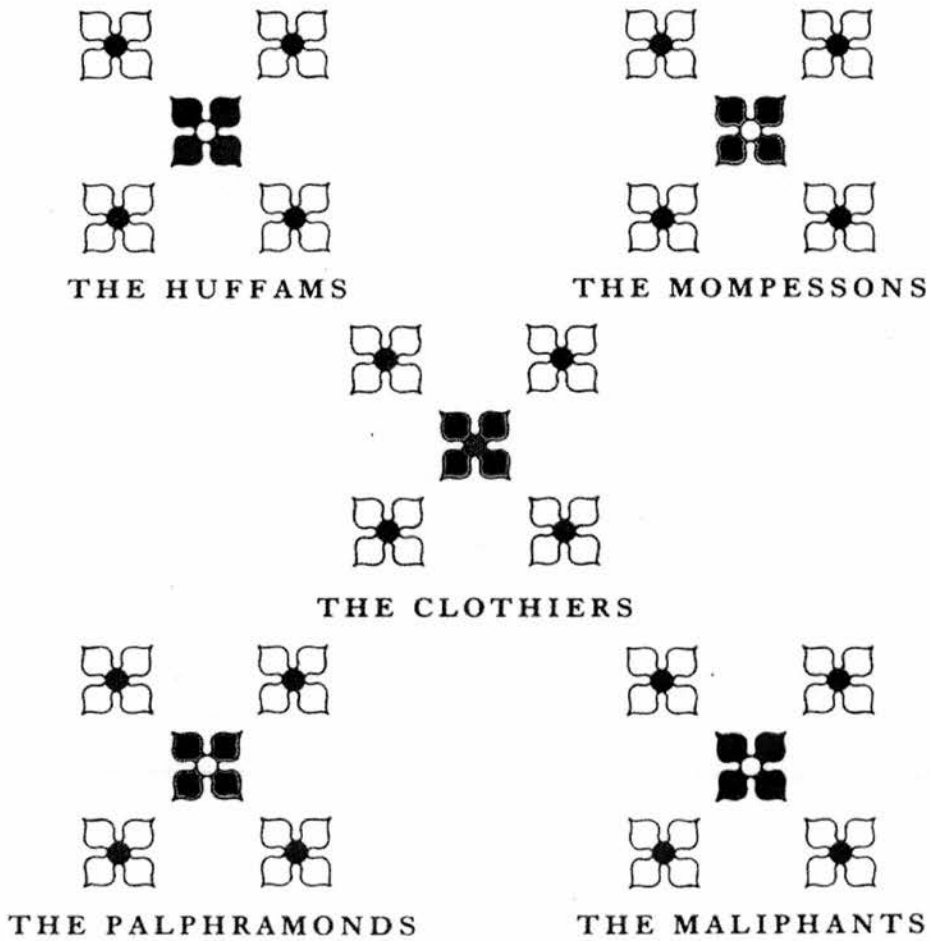
THE MALIPHANTS



Charles Palliser, *The Quincunx: The Inheritance of John Huffam* (London: Penguin, 1990)



**DIAGRAM 3**  
**Coloured Quincunxes**



Charles Palliser, *The Quincunx: The Inheritance of John Huffam* (Edinburgh, Canongate, 1989)

## Chapter Five

### Memorialising the Past: Biography and Photography

Neo-Victorian fictions are, in some senses, a memorial to the Victorian past they depict; they both mark its passing and guarantee its continued presence in the present. Yet they do not nostalgically return to the Victorian era, rather they establish its historical specificity and so assert their historical distance from the Victorian past. Although they recognise the importance of the Victorian heritage for contemporary culture these novels also confront the dramatic changes that necessitate a transformation of the Victorian models, they mark the passing of the Victorian age. Like a photograph, these texts seek to recapture a past moment in its historical particularity and, whilst maintaining an awareness of the historical distance from that moment, to bring it into the present. Indeed, two of these texts, A. S. Byatt's *The Biographer's Tale* and James Wilson's *The Dark Clue*, explicitly interrogate the forms of commemoration available in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, focusing on biography and photography.

Photography's memorial aspect was evident in such nineteenth-century practices as photographing the dead. The most obvious illustration of this was the response to Prince Albert's death as '70,000 portraits of the Prince Consort were sold during the week following his death'.<sup>1</sup> Beaumont Newhall examines the popularity of photographs of Albert and photographic albums in relation to the high mortality rate in the Victorian era. Newhall's account posits a personal explanation for the desire for photographic remains; he understands it as a response to the physical

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<sup>1</sup> Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography from 1839 to the present* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1982) 64.

circumstances of death in the nineteenth century which, in contrast to our sanitised era, often occurred within the home.

In contrast, in an article entitled 'Not Fading Away: Photography in the Age of Oblivion', Jennifer Green-Lewis considers photography's role in relation to a wider cultural anxiety of forgetting. Green-Lewis's term 'the age of oblivion' incorporates the numerous scientific advances that challenged prevailing conceptions of time and history in the nineteenth century. Consequently, 'By the 1830s, human memory no longer defined the limits of history but was instead eclipsed by oblivion, a great void into which the present must fall as fast as the world moved toward the future'.<sup>2</sup> Photography was thus a means of ensuring the preservation of human memory and an escape from the prospect of oblivion.<sup>3</sup> Yet photography became not only a tool for memory in the nineteenth century but also a metaphor for the processes of memory. In his *Principles of Mental Physiology* (1874), William Benjamin Carpenter claimed that the processes of memory occur 'just as the invisible impression left upon the sensitive paper of the Photographer [...] is developed into a picture by the application of particular chemical re-agents'.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, biographies often adopt the stance of memorialising the subject, even if they are still alive. To borrow the title of Martin Stannard's essay, biography is 'The Necrophiliac Art' since it presupposes the death of its subject.<sup>5</sup> This aspect can be seen in the

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<sup>2</sup> Jennifer Green-Lewis, 'Not Fading Away: Photography in the Age of Oblivion.' *Nineteenth-Century Photography: Contexts, Discourses, Legacies*. Spec. issue of *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, ed. Richard L. Stein 22 (2001): 563.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the Victorian anxiety of forgetting see also Gillian Beer, 'Origins and Oblivion in Victorian Narrative,' *Arguing with the Past: Essays in Narrative from Woolf to Sidney* (London: Routledge, 1989) 12-33.

<sup>4</sup> William Benjamin Carpenter, 'Of Memory, from *Principles of Mental Physiology* (1874),' *Embodied Selves: An Anthology of Psychological Texts 1830-1890*, eds. Jenny Bourne Taylor and Sally Shuttleworth (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998) 154-57, 155.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Stannard, 'The Necrophiliac Art?' *The Literary Biography: Problems and Solutions* Ed. Dale Salwark (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1996): 32-40.

prevalence of death-bed scenes in Victorian biographies, indeed, as Richard Altick notes, it was 'the one obligatory scene in nineteenth-century biography'.<sup>6</sup>

Both biographies and photographs are effective memorials because they testify to the existence of their subject, they assert an indexical relation to the world. Indeed, this aspect of biography was frequently commented upon and valued in the nineteenth century; Carlyle repeatedly asserted biography's higher claims over fiction on the grounds of its veracity.<sup>7</sup> Photographic portraits serve to validate an individual's existence by providing a trace of them, the photograph records the subject's presence in a particular place at a particular time. A photograph asserts an individual's unique identity and distinguishes them from other members of society, as can be seen in the Police Force's adoption of photography in the compilation of criminal databases.<sup>8</sup> Criminal photography was part of the nineteenth-century discourses on phrenology and physiognomy in which the physical features of an individual were believed to be an indicator of personality. This confidence in the face as an index of character is demonstrated in the adoption of photography to illustrate physiognomic traits, Hugh Diamond delivered a paper to the Royal Society in 1856 entitled 'On the Application of Photography to the Physiognomic and Mental Phenomenon of Insanity'.<sup>9</sup> Photography became a means for classifying "types", whether criminal or insane, and thus was part of the taxonomic drive of the Victorian era. Such taxonomic projects demonstrate photography's role in asserting social

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<sup>6</sup> Richard D. Altick, *Lives and Letters: A History of Literary Biography in England and America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969) 210.

<sup>7</sup> See Thomas Carlyle, 'Biography,' 1832, rpt. *Selected Essays*, introd. Ian Campbell (London: Dent, 1972): 65-79; 73, 76.

<sup>8</sup> On the failure of this taxonomic process see Jennifer Green-Lewis, *Framing the Victorians: Photography and the Culture of Realism* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1996) 218.

<sup>9</sup> See William Greenslade, *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel, 1880-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994) 99.

bonds and inscribing the individual within their community, a less menacing form of which was the popularity of *cartes des visites* during the nineteenth century.

Roland Barthes's well-known pronouncements on photography foreground its function as both an index and memorial of the subject: the photograph 'certifies, so to speak, that the corpse is alive, as *corpse*: it is the living image of a dead thing'.<sup>10</sup> Photography is related to death in that it captures the image of something that was once alive but soon will not be. This relationship to death is suggested by the physical circumstances of photography in the Victorian era: subjects had to be clamped into position and retain a fixed look for the long exposure times. In fact, many of the photographs of babies and animals from the Victorian era would have been taken post-mortem because of the difficulties of photographing such subjects whilst alive.

Photography's indexical relationship to the world needs to be considered in terms of Victorian attitudes towards realism. Stephen Bann argues that the 'historical-mindedness' of the nineteenth century was concerned with 'the mythic aim of narrowing the gap between history as it happened, and history as it is written.'<sup>11</sup> He claims photography represents the achievement of this aim since 'the crucial relevance of photography to historical representation lies in the fact that it gradually converts the otherness of *space* [...] into an otherness of *time*, which is guaranteed by the indexical nature [...] of the photographic process.'<sup>12</sup> As with literary realism, however, the Victorians were not naïve about the problems entailed in photographic representations, they recognised that a photograph could manipulate

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<sup>10</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982) 78-9. See also Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1979).

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Bann, *The Clothing of Clio: A Study of the Representation of History in Nineteenth-Century Britain and France* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984) 165.

<sup>12</sup> Bann, *Clothing of Clio*, 134.



the reality it supposedly merely reflected. The distortion of reality was apparent even in the circumstances surrounding photographic portraiture: the photograph was usually taken against a painted background in a studio and the subject was often provided with props by the photographer. Moreover, as the century progressed photography was taken up by spiritualism; spirit photographs were supposed to guarantee spiritualism's claims yet they could also undermine photography's claims to mimesis. Despite this ambivalent relationship to realism, photography's indexical relationship to the world was recuperated by its incorporation into the legal system. During the nineteenth century, photographs became admissible as evidence in trials and even acquired more authority than an eye-witness testimony.<sup>13</sup>

Situated as they were on the borderline between history and literature (in the case of biography) and art and science (in the case of photography), biography and photography occupied homologous positions in nineteenth-century discourses. Focusing on Victorian articles, I explore the contentious positions biography and photography occupied in the nineteenth century, and trace the connections between those positions. My discussion of nineteenth-century biography focuses on the popular "lives and letters" form. I will then analyse the treatment of both biography and photography within the two neo-Victorian texts and address their transformations of the Victorian models.

### **Positioning Biography and Photography in Nineteenth-Century Discourses**

In an 1854 article entitled 'The Biographical Mania' Horatio Mansfield oscillates between lamenting the current state of biography and projecting an ideal form. Mansfield's article is occasioned by the increasing popularity of biography,

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<sup>13</sup> Green-Lewis, *Framing*, 187-88.

which he likens to a tide that ‘continues to heave and swell upwards [...]’, and is pessimistic concerning the effects of this “mania” claiming it ‘is diluting our literature; it is caricaturing religion; it is dwarfing science [...]’.<sup>14</sup> In referring to biography’s impact on both literature and science, Mansfield indicates that biography was confined to neither sphere, it existed in an uneasy realm between the two.

History began to assert its claims to be a scientific discipline during the nineteenth century and so biography also existed in an uneasy relationship to literature and history. Biography is seen to have more dramatic interest than history, but less authority: ‘With less stateliness than history, biography throws more light on political and social affairs, than its elder sister; [...] and imparts a breathing, life-like spirit to what would, otherwise, be the dull record of chronology’.<sup>15</sup> History and Literature were both contending for legitimacy as academic disciplines during the nineteenth century and biography played an important role in this process.<sup>16</sup> To assert its independent status, history sought to distance itself from literature and align itself with science through the adoption of scientific principles such as objectivity, reliability and a commitment to factual evidence.

Alongside his criticisms of the state of biography, Mansfield constructs the criteria for the ideal form of biography. These criteria are based on a scientific model and concern the choice of subject, the position of the biographer, and the importance of truth. Mansfield describes the choice of biographical subjects through the image of a pyramid: ‘instead of confining itself, as was once the case, to the apex

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<sup>14</sup> Horatio Mansfield, ‘The Biographical Mania,’ *Tait’s Magazine* 21 (1854): 16-23; 16.

<sup>15</sup> Mansfield, 17. See also Archibald Allison, Biography ‘possesses the value of history, without its tedium – the interest of romance, without its unsubstantiality’, ‘Biography,’ *Blackwood’s Magazine* 69 (1851): 40-54, 42.

<sup>16</sup> See David Amigoni, *Victorian Biography: Intellectuals and the Ordering of Discourse* (New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993); and Rosemary Jann, *The Art and Science of Victorian History* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1985).

of the pyramid, [biography] now nestles itself at the base [...].<sup>17</sup> This image seems to indicate a class bias in its criticism of the choice of subjects from the base of the pyramid but, as his subsequent recommendations reveal, Mansfield's image is based on a notion of moral rather than social stature.

What we contend for is, that no man or woman, be they high or low, known or obscure, orthodox or heretic, should have his or her "life" taken, unless they walked through the world with visible stamp and brand of being true to some great principle, of having done some good work, of having resisted some arch temptation, of having held up a distinct light to the world.<sup>18</sup>

Mansfield's rhetoric here suggests what he considered to be the purpose of biography, to provide a moral example. He acknowledges that 'we require to know the faults, as well as the virtues of our brethren and sisters, if we are really to profit by their example'.<sup>19</sup> Thus, Mansfield appears to call for a certain frankness from biographers and a commitment to tell the whole truth, no matter how unpleasant: 'Biography is useful in the direct proportion that it is truthful'.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, many nineteenth-century commentators recognised that biography's force was a result of its relationship to truth. As Carlyle remarked in his 1832 essay 'Biography', the memorableness of events in biography 'depends on the object; on its being *real*, on its being really *seen*'.<sup>21</sup>

Yet the commitment to truth-telling in Victorian biography conflicted with a belief in discretion, even Mansfield conceded 'We may not tear down the curtain of domestic privacy'.<sup>22</sup> This conflict remained ever present for Victorian biographers

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<sup>17</sup> Mansfield, 16.

<sup>18</sup> Mansfield, 18.

<sup>19</sup> Mansfield, 22.

<sup>20</sup> Mansfield, 21.

<sup>21</sup> Carlyle, 'Biography,' *Selected Essays*, 76. See also Allison, 41.

<sup>22</sup> Mansfield, 22.

and is illustrated by Gaskell's paradoxical comment in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857): 'I came to the resolution of writing truly, if I wrote at all; of withholding nothing, though some things, from their very nature, could not be spoken of so fully as others'.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, the two incompatible impulses of truth-telling and discretion remained problematic for biographers until Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918), which declares that the biographer's duty is 'to maintain his own freedom of spirit. It is not his business to be complimentary; it is his business to lay bare the facts of the case, as he understands them'.<sup>24</sup> This commitment to truth even at the expense of discretion raises question about the position of the biographer. Although he maintains the need for discretion, Mansfield similarly calls for the biographer to be objective and especially derides biographies written by the departed's spouse or friend since 'it is next to impossible that consanguineous, or very "friendly," biography should be truthful'.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, Mansfield implicitly connects the biographer's desired objectivity to the emerging scientific principles of history in asserting the need for temporal perspective on the subject: 'In the moral as well as in the natural world, there is a certain focal distance to be observed, if we are to see things in their relative proportions'.<sup>26</sup>

Biography's instrumental role in the construction of these separate academic disciplines was evident in the newly established university courses in History and Literature, which were constructed on a biographical basis.<sup>27</sup> Yet biography not only influenced the formation of the academic disciplines, it was also used to assert the

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<sup>23</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, 1857, ed. Alan Shelston (London: Penguin, 1985) 490.

<sup>24</sup> Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians*, introd. Michael Holroyd (1918. London: Penguin, 1986) 10.

<sup>25</sup> Mansfield, 21.

<sup>26</sup> Mansfield, 21.

<sup>27</sup> As Amigoni notes 'University courses in English history stressed the individual role of major figures [...] Similarly, university courses in English literature told the story which Victorian culture narrated about the history of English writing as manifested through the lives of its authors', 2.



primacy of history over literature. Biography provided a means to popularise history by presenting it in a form that was not only accessible, but also of interest, to the masses. As a reviewer of *Lives of the Queens of Scotland* remarked, 'biography [...] is much more likely to be generally popular than extended history, because it partakes more of the character of Romance, and possesses in a higher degree that *unity* of interest which is the most essential element in all arts which aim at pleasing or fascinating mankind'.<sup>28</sup> The quality of "Romance" this reviewer ascribes to biography again reveals its precarious position between history and literature. John Seeley, a key figure in the popularisation of history through biography, recognised that 'The mass of mankind, those who have little leisure for reading, and no motive for it but amusement, will not read any more about states and governments than can be presented to them in biographies of famous men'.<sup>29</sup> David Amigoni's study *Victorian Biography* (1993) traces biography's role in the formation of the discipline of history. Amigoni's account turns on the dual meaning of "discipline". He argues that biography was not only instrumental in establishing history as an academic discipline by appealing to a mass audience but also in disciplining that audience in the emerging scientific modes of historical thinking and so grant legitimacy to the new historical methods.

Photography grew at a rapid rate during the nineteenth century from the initial announcement of Daguerre's discoveries in 1839 to the introduction of the Kodak roll-film cameras in 1888. The 1850s was a particularly important decade in the development of this new technology, witnessing an increase in the range of

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<sup>28</sup> Allison, 'Biography,' 44.

<sup>29</sup> John Robert Seeley, 'Preface,' *The Life and Adventures of Ernst Moritz Arndt, the Singer of the German Fatherland*, comp. John Robert Seeley, (London: Seeley, Jackson & Halliday, 1879) iii-xiv, v-vi.



photographic works as well as the formation of photographic societies and clubs and the emergence of photographers now considered the foremost practitioners of the nineteenth century, such as Julia Margaret Cameron and Lewis Carroll.<sup>30</sup> Despite this growing popularity and acceptance within nineteenth-century culture, photography proved problematic to categorise. Its techniques clearly belonged to the realm of science, yet its products resembled paintings. The second Great International Exhibition, held in 1862, provides a telling illustration of the anxiety caused by photography's contentious position between art and science. The organisers' decision to categorise photography as machinery and photographers as mechanics caused uproar amongst photographers who felt that their products belonged to the realm of art.<sup>31</sup>

In an article published in the *Quarterly Review* of April 1857 Eastlake traces the emergence and increasing popularity of photography to the point that 'photography has become a household word and a household want; is used alike by art and science, by love, business, and justice [...]'.<sup>32</sup> Eastlake explicitly positions her article within the debate over whether photography was an art or a science, declaring her aim as being 'to investigate the connexion of photography with art – to decide how far the sun may be considered an artist, and to what branch of imitation his powers are best adapted'.<sup>33</sup> This notion of the sun as artist has implications for the role of the photographer but it also relates to photography's claims to be an art: how can it be an art if the artist is nature? The anxieties concerning photography's

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<sup>30</sup> See Pam Roberts, 'Julia Margaret Cameron: A Triumph over Criticism,' *The Portrait in Photography*, Ed. Graham Clarke (London: Reaktion Books, 1992) 51.

<sup>31</sup> See 'Photographic Portraiture,' *Once a Week* 31 Jan 1863: 148-50; 148; and Green-Lewis, *Framing*, 39-49.

<sup>32</sup> [Elizabeth Eastlake], 'Photography,' *Quarterly Review* 101 (1857): 443.

<sup>33</sup> Eastlake, 445.

precarious position in relation to art were evident even at an institutional level. The Photographic Society of Great Britain was established in London in 1853 and, as Eastlake informs us, 'Its first chairman, in order to give the newly instituted body the support and recognition which art was supposed to owe it, was chosen expressly from the realms of art'.<sup>34</sup> The first chairman of the society was none other than Eastlake's husband, Sir Charles Eastlake, an amateur photographer and Director of the National Gallery from 1855 to 1865. Appointing someone from the art world was an attempt to counteract the underlying anxieties about whether photography qualified as an art.

In asserting its status as an art, photography was thought by some to be usurping painting's special province, yet the relationship between photography and painting was much more complex. Jennifer Green-Lewis argues that the second generation of amateur photographers in England, including Cameron and Carroll, 'produced work that emulated painting in both style and subject matter and thus could be regarded not as a threat to the conventional art form but as a secondary or mimetic instance of it'.<sup>35</sup> To illustrate she refers to images which have become part of the photographic canon, such as Lewis Carroll's photograph of Alice Liddell as a Beggar Girl and Julia Margaret Cameron's photographs of famous Victorian men. These photographs, she argues, 'refer in many cases to other works, [the] photographers recognize their "belatedness" in a tradition of visual culture and express self-conscious, even ironic relations to that culture'.<sup>36</sup> Thus, despite being a new and modern form which exploited new scientific techniques, these

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<sup>34</sup> Eastlake, 444.

<sup>35</sup> Green-Lewis *Framing*, 61.

<sup>36</sup> Green-Lewis *Framing*, 13.

photographers sought to establish their work within the existing tradition of painting, especially portraiture.<sup>37</sup>

Eastlake's article attempts to resolve the apparent threat photography posed to art by suggesting that it is simultaneously both an art and not an art: 'Photography is intended to supersede much that art has hitherto done, but only that which it was both a misappropriation and a deterioration of Art to do'.<sup>38</sup> Thus, whilst photography's status as an art is asserted in its adoption of some of art's functions, it is subsequently undermined by the revelation that those areas do not properly belong to the realm of art. Eastlake's position provides an instance of what has become the prevailing mythology of the relationship between art and photography in the nineteenth century. According to this myth, photography released the artist from the burden of realism, thereby enabling them to pursue other modes of representation.

The contested positions of biography and photography in the nineteenth century are not just similar but homologous. Although the categories differ, literature and history or art and science, the underlying arguments are the same. In the nineteenth century, history was aspiring to the conditions of science in its pursuit of objectivity and verifiability whilst both art and literature were seen to belong to the realm of imagination and thus were subjective modes of representation. As the discussion in Chapter 2 demonstrated, Ranke was considered one of the foremost practitioners of this scientific approach to history. He believed that the historian's task was to approach the past objectively: 'It is not up to us to judge about error and truth as such. We merely observe one figure (*Gestalt*) arising side by side with another figure [...]. Our task is to penetrate them to the bottom of their existence and

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<sup>37</sup> As Green-Lewis notes 'nineteenth-century pictorial photography reworked Pre-Raphaelite modes of storytelling', *Framing* 4.

<sup>38</sup> Eastlake, 466.

to portray them with complete objectivity'.<sup>39</sup> The notion of objectivity was significant to discussions of both biography and photography, placing the biographer and photographer in a similar position.

As Mansfield's article suggests, the biographer was meant to adopt an objective approach to their subject similar to that of a scientist, their role was to collect and represent the facts. Mansfield consistently asserts the need for the life to be rendered 'correctly and efficiently' and claims that can only be achieved by an impartial biographer.<sup>40</sup> In a slightly later article, Robert Goodbrand claims that this quality has been achieved: 'The biographer is no longer partisan'.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, the biographer is supposed to absent himself from the work so that the reader can focus on the subject being presented, as such the biographer is always subordinate to the biographee.<sup>42</sup> These two imperatives for biography were achieved most obviously in the "Lives and Letters" mode which became the typical mode of serious biography in the nineteenth century.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, even biographies that did not advertise themselves as belonging to the lives and letters mode often incorporated many of the subject's private papers.<sup>44</sup> As a consequence of the nineteenth-century biographer's assumption that 'all letters have equal usefulness and equal authority' for the biographical portrait, the "lives and letters" mode sought to incorporate as much

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<sup>39</sup> Leopold von Ranke, 'On the Character of Historical Science' (A Manuscript of the 1830s), trans. Wilma A. Iggers, Leopold von Ranke, *The Theory and Practice of History*, ed. and introd. Georg G. Iggers and Konrad von Moltke (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973) 33-46, 42.

<sup>40</sup> Mansfield, 17.

<sup>41</sup> Robert Goodbrand, 'A Suggestion For a New Kind of Biography,' *The Contemporary Review* 14 (1870): 20-28, 26.

<sup>42</sup> See Mansfield, 22. For recent discussions of Victorian biographical practices see Ira Bruce Nadel, *Biography: Fiction, Fact and Form* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1984); and Altick, *Lives and Letters*.

<sup>43</sup> See Altick, 193; and Hilary Fraser with Daniel Brown, *English Prose of the Nineteenth Century* (London: Longman, 1997) 128-9. Prominent examples of this mode of biography include: Carlyle's *Life of John Sterling* (1851) and Cross's *George Eliot's Life* (1885).

<sup>44</sup> For instance, in John Forster's *Life of Charles Dickens* (1872-74) 'the most memorable passages [are ...] from Dickens' own autobiographical recollections', Fraser and Brown, 129.

documentary evidence as possible.<sup>45</sup> This method had two concomitant results: it allowed the subject to speak in the own words and precluded any overt intervention on the biographer's part.<sup>46</sup>

The photographer is similarly meant to absent himself from the photograph, literally in that they are not in the frame and figuratively as they are not meant to impose their view on the photograph. This omission of the role of the photographer is linguistically encoded; the verb to photograph does not designate an agent. Instead it inscribes the importance of the product, the photograph.<sup>47</sup> To return to Eastlake's article, the terms in which she sets out her aim removes the photographer from the question: 'Our chief object at present is to investigate the connexion of photography with art – to decide how far the sun may be considered an artist [...]'.<sup>48</sup> Later in the article, the sun is personified as Eastlake discusses the advancements in photographic techniques in terms of the amount of agency required on its part. Early techniques, such as that of Niepce, required the sun to become 'a drudge in a twelve-hours' factory' because of the long exposure time required. With the invention of collodion, however, 'he literally does no more than wink his eye, tracing in that moment, with a detail and precision beyond all human power, the glory of the heavens, the wonders of the deep [...]'.<sup>49</sup> Whilst the sun is personified, it possesses powers superior to humans; powers of exact representation.

By omitting the photographer from the question and declaring the sun as the producer of photographs, Eastlake implicitly asserts their status as fact. This rhetoric was persistent in nineteenth-century discussions of photography; indeed William

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<sup>45</sup> Altick, 317.

<sup>46</sup> See Altick, 196-7.

<sup>47</sup> See Green-Lewis, *Framing* 64.

<sup>48</sup> Eastlake, 445.

<sup>49</sup> Eastlake, 453.



Henry Fox Talbot's book on photography declares this approach in its title: *The Pencil of Nature* (1844). Jennifer Green-Lewis notes the importance of this rhetoric of the sun as artist for photography's claims to truth. She states that 'If the sun were determined to be the true author, then its prints could be deemed as reliable as fingerprints were later to be considered, a means of knowing one's world through accumulation and classification'.<sup>50</sup> The notion of accumulated knowledge is equally applicable to Victorian biographical practices: 'It is considered an essential part of the modern biographic art that, in the story of any man's life, the biographer shall contrive to inweave not only any interesting letters [...] but also as much information as he can possibly scrape together respecting the man's eyes, nose, and mouth [...]'.<sup>51</sup> The drive to represent the subject as fully as possible produced the multi-volume biography that came to epitomise nineteenth-century biographical practice, what Lytton Strachey refers to as 'Those two fat volumes, with which it is our custom to commemorate the dead [...]'.<sup>52</sup>

Although Eastlake presents the sun as the "author" of photographs, her article does consider the emerging figure of the photographer. She notes their appearance in the London Directory to demonstrate the explosion of photographers from the single individual asserting his profession as a daguerreotype artist in 1842 to the position in 1857 when 'photographers have a heading to themselves and stand at 147'.<sup>53</sup> Eastlake, however, is less interested in the photographer's relation to their work or their position as artists than with their role in society. The rapid growth of the

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<sup>50</sup> Green-Lewis, *Framing*, 60.

<sup>51</sup> [David Masson], 'Portrait-Painting in History,' rev. of *Classic and Historic Portraits*, by James Bruce, *The British Quarterly Review* 18 (1853): 484-512, 485.

<sup>52</sup> Strachey, *Eminent Victorians*, 10.

<sup>53</sup> Eastlake, 443.

professional photographer induces class anxieties in the aristocratic Eastlake. She asks:

But who can number the legion of petty dabblers, who  
display their trays of specimens along every great  
thoroughfare in London, executing for our lowest servants,  
for one shilling, that which no money could have commanded  
for the Rothschild bride of twenty years ago?<sup>54</sup>

The multitude of photographers are designated as ‘petty dabblers’ whilst those listed in the London Directory are seen to be ‘the higher representatives of the art’, a distinction dependent upon whether the photographer engages in the pursuit for business or pleasure.<sup>55</sup> Eastlake’s class anxieties do not simply concern the emerging figure of the photographer but also the extension of the privilege of photography to the lower classes. Her reference to the Rothschild bride reveals that access to portraits had previously been restricted to those with the wealth and connections necessary to engage an artist. The increasing accessibility of photography, however, made it possible for those who merely aspired to respectability to possess a portrait of themselves or their relatives, it was no longer an indicator of social status. As another contemporary commentator remarks, ‘Photography has now become an institution; [...] and portraits once obtainable only by the rich, now hang on the walls of the meanest cottage’.<sup>56</sup>

The products of biography and photography are not only meant to be dissociated from their “authors” but are also meant to deny their own status as representations. Both a biography and a photograph claim to directly present their subject, to provide a ‘correct likeness’, rather than a representation.<sup>57</sup> In

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<sup>54</sup> Eastlake, 443.

<sup>55</sup> Eastlake, 443.

<sup>56</sup> ‘Photographic Portraiture’, 148.

<sup>57</sup> Mansfield, 22.

contemplating biographies and photographs, the observer's attention is focused on that which is represented rather than the mode in which it is represented. As Roland Barthes says, 'A specific photograph, in effect, is never distinguished from its referent (from what it represents) [...]' '[...] a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see'.<sup>58</sup> Biography equally strives for this invisibility of the mode of representation since it too is supposed to merely present its subject in an objective and factual manner, yet its failure to achieve this is more apparent.

A biography's connection to the individual who produced it is more obvious than a photograph's connection to its photographer. Yet responses to biography generally focus on whether the portrait presented is a "true" likeness of its subject rather than the techniques used to present that subject. For example, the controversy surrounding J. A. Froude's biography of Carlyle centred on the issues of whether the portrait was an accurate one and, if it was, whether it was ethical to present such a negative portrait.<sup>59</sup> These two considerations appear contradictory since the first questions the verisimilitude of the portrait whilst the second implies that complete verisimilitude is not desirable. The ethical question, however, can be recuperated into one of verisimilitude since the issue was whether it was appropriate to reveal such details about such a well-respected man, and so whether the details corresponded to the public persona of Carlyle.<sup>60</sup> The question of discretion related to the morality of nineteenth-century biography; it was supposed to provide a moral example to its reader, by presenting either a model to be emulated or one to be

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<sup>58</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 5, 6. See also Sontag, *On Photography*.

<sup>59</sup> See for instance, Trev Broughton, 'The Froude-Carlyle Embroilment: Married Life as a Literary Problem,' *Victorian Studies* 38 (1995): 551-85.

<sup>60</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell faced a similar dilemma in writing the biography of Charlotte Brontë: 'The difficulty that presented itself most strongly to me when I first had the honour of being requested to write this biography, was how I could show what a noble, true, and tender woman Charlotte Brontë really was [...]', *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, 490.

rejected.<sup>61</sup> The hagiographic impulse present in much Victorian biography is evident in Carlyle's lecture series 'On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and The Heroic in History'. In his second lecture, 'The Hero as Prophet', Carlyle claims that '[...] of a Great Man especially, of him I will venture to assert that it is incredible he should have been other than true'.<sup>62</sup> Therefore, great men are the proper subjects of biographies not only because of their accomplishments but also because they provide a moral exemplar for the readers: 'We cannot look, however imperfectly, upon a great man, without gaining something by him'.<sup>63</sup> Carlyle was the most fervent proponent of the "Great Man" approach to history in the nineteenth century, declaring that '[...] the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here'.<sup>64</sup> This belief in the impact of significant individuals on the course of a nation's history fed into the ideology of bourgeois individualism, which praised the "self-made man". A prominent illustration of this interest in the "self-made man" is Samuel Smiles's biographical project *Lives of the Engineers* (1861-2). This series presented the lives of "Captains of Industry" and clearly served the prevailing ideologies of bourgeois individualism and the protestant work ethic.<sup>65</sup>

A similar paradox between verisimilitude and discretion occurs in photography since it claims to present a true likeness of the subject yet early subjects often felt that the camera was too revealing since it did not care about presenting a

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<sup>61</sup> See Mansfield, 22. Julia Wedgwood argues that the biographer should also provide 'his readers a lesson in moral judgement, especially in the discrimination of character and circumstance,' 'Mr Froude as a Biographer,' rev. of *Reminiscences*, by Thomas Carlyle, ed. J. A. Froude, *Contemporary Review* 39 (1881): 821-42, 823.

<sup>62</sup> Carlyle, 'The Hero as Prophet. Mahomet: Islam,' *Sartour Resartus; Lectures on Heroes; Chartism; Past and Present* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1890) 218.

<sup>63</sup> Carlyle, 'The Hero as Divinity' 185.

<sup>64</sup> Thomas Carlyle, 'The Hero as Divinity. Odin, Paganism. Scandinavian Mythology,' *Sartour Resartus; Lectures on Heroes; Chartism; Past and Present* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1890) 185.

<sup>65</sup> See Altick, 88; and Fraser and Brown, 157.



flattering image. Considering the circumstances in which early portrait photographs were taken it is not surprising that subjects often claimed that the image was not a true likeness. Although the dissemination of photography extended beyond the rich and famous it had not yet become the everyday occurrence it is in the twentieth century, having your photograph taken was considered a special event, one for which it was necessary to present your best image. Indeed, an article published in *Once a Week* in January 1863 advises readers as to what clothes are most suitable for a photographic portrait. Having ascertained that black is the best colour, the author advises that it must be black silk, 'as the admirable effect of silk depends upon its gloss, which makes the garment full of those subdued and reflected lights which give motion and play to the drapery'.<sup>66</sup> Throughout the essay, the author laments the democratic nature of photography which erases class distinctions. The advice concerning the appropriate clothes for a photograph reasserts the class hierarchy into the photographic medium since those sitters who occupy a position of status and wealth in society will produce the best photographs by virtue of wearing silk.

### **Biographical Narratives in Neo-Victorian Fiction**

The title of A. S. Byatt's *The Biographer's Tale* clearly signals its interest in biography; the protagonist, Phineas G. Nanson, is a postgraduate student who becomes disillusioned with theory and abandons his studies to embark on a biography of Scholes Destry-Scholes. The action of Byatt's novel occurs entirely in the twentieth century and it focuses on Phineas's biographical project, which itself considers a twentieth-century figure, Scholes Destry-Scholes. It is only with the introduction of Destry-Scholes's biographical subjects, Sir Elmer Bole, Francis

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<sup>66</sup> 'Photographic Portraiture', 149.



Galton and Henrik Ibsen, that the reader enters the Victorian era. In contrast, Wilson's novel is located entirely in the nineteenth century. The biographer-protagonists, Walter and Marian, are nineteenth-century figures known to the reader from Wilkie Collins's novel *The Woman in White*. Moreover, their biographical subject is the famous nineteenth-century artist, Turner. Both novels engage with the Victorian practices of biography and implicitly connect it to the development of photography at that time and indeed *The Biographer's Tale* incorporates photographs into its narrative. This chapter explores the relationship between the Victorian practice of photography and nineteenth-century forms of biography in terms of their positions in relation to issues of truth, objectivity and their role as memorials. Both modes provide an interesting lens through which to examine the position of historical figures within these texts.

In addition to adopting the protagonists, Wilson's novel also adopts the narrative technique of Collins's novel. In the Preface to *The Woman in White* Walter Hartright sets out his purpose to imitate the proceedings of a court. This has implications for the narrative structure: 'the story [...] will be told by more than one pen, as the story of an offence against the laws is told in Court by more than one witness'.<sup>67</sup> Wilson's *The Dark Clue* adopts this technique as the story is recounted through the letters, diaries, and notebooks of the various characters, most often those of Walter and Marian. The narrative is composed of various texts that acquire the status of pieces of evidence. In contrast, Byatt's novel is told mainly through Phineas's first-person narrative, the manuscript account of his biographical research. Yet Byatt's novel also presents inserted texts such as transcriptions of Destry-

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<sup>67</sup> Wilkie Collins, *Woman in White*, 1860, ed. and introd. John Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996) 5.

Scholes's lecture notes, his card index, and his biographical fragments on Linnaeus, Galton and Ibsen.

The mediation of the narrative through such texts comments on the methodology of biography. The reliance on diaries and letters to narrate the story in *The Dark Clue* highlights the extent to which history, and in particular biographies, are constructed from the fragmented and subjective remains of the past. Marian recognises the limitations of the documents on which a biography is based in her thoughts on Kitty Driver's correspondence:

[...] people had only written to her at length, of course, when she – or they – had been away from home. The contents of these drawers – like the negative of a photographic image, or the fossilized marks made by some vanished ancient creature – were the impressions left by *absence* (DC, 257).

The intimate nature of such documents also reflects upon the ethical problems surrounding Victorian biography. As the previous discussion of nineteenth-century biographical practices revealed, biography was caught between the drive for truth and the necessity for decency. The ethical dimension of biography is explicitly explored in *The Dark Clue*: 'We are brought up to believe that letters and diaries are sacrosanct, and that it is the blackest dishonour to violate their secrets [...]' (DC, 157). The view that such documents are sacrosanct is derived from the belief that they reveal something of the inner-self, that the self is somehow exposed in them. This belief accounts for the prevalence of the "lives and letters" mode of biography in the nineteenth century, which assumed that the best biographical portrait would represent the subject in their own words.<sup>68</sup> Although the documents incorporated

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<sup>68</sup> As Altick remarks, 'If the truth of a man's character and career was what the biographer strove to record, where could it be found more faithfully and abundantly recorded than in his private papers?', 197. See also 'Preface', *George Eliot's Life as Related in her Letters and Journals, Arranged and*

into *The Biographer's Tale* are rarely of such an intimate nature, they still contribute to a metafictional consideration of the methodology of biography. As Phineas comes to realise, biographical projects can never recover the life of their subject since they are condemned to rely on textual accounts of the figure they are investigating, especially when the subject was themselves a biographer.

Yet the biographers in both texts seem to maintain a belief that texts can provide access to the “real life” of their subjects, or rather that certain types of texts can. Investigating the contents of Destry-Scholes’s card index, Phineas discovers two cards written in verse. He records how ‘For a wild moment, I thought that Destry-Scholes himself had written these poems, that I had, so to speak, met him naked’ (*BT*, 136). Phineas’s reaction articulates the assumption that art reveals the soul of the artist. Yet the poems uncovered by Phineas fail to reveal Destry-Scholes since they were in fact written by Destry-Scholes’s subjects: Linnaeus and Ibsen. Once again, then, Phineas’s attempts to discover Destry-Scholes only lead him to other of his biographical subjects. A similar assumption is held by Marian and Walter in their biographical pursuit of Turner. Marian believes that the key to Turner’s life is in his paintings, an attitude shared by many other figures in the text, notably Sir Charles Eastlake and Ruskin. Contemplating the *Bay of Baiae* Marian realises that it is actually two paintings; it shows Sybil and Apollo both at the outset of their narrative and also their subsequent destruction and desolation (*DC*, 273). Marian applies this observation to Turner’s life to account for what initially appear to be contradictions in the dates of important events. She discovers that Turner’s life mirrors his art; he led two lives and almost invariably kept two houses. Again, then,

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*Edited by her Husband*, J. W. Cross, ed. 3 Vols. (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1885) Vol. I, v-xi.

the assumption is that art in some way reveals the inner life of the artist and so can be used to comprehend their life. Literary biography of the nineteenth century was predicated on a similar assumption that 'there is an essential connection between person and artist [...] Individual traits and circumstances, in other words, are the key to art'.<sup>69</sup>

In *The Biographer's Tale* this belief is explicitly juxtaposed with the poststructuralist claims that texts only tell of other texts, not of the world. Phineas's decision to write a biography is a response to the fragmentation of the individual that occurs within theoretical discourses, specifically post-structuralism. Phineas's rejection of theory in favour of 'a life full of *things* [...] Full of facts' (*BT*, 4) is taken during a postgraduate seminar on 'Lacan's theory of *morcellement*, the dismemberment of the imagined body' (*BT*, 1). Phineas's decision to write a biography could be interpreted as an attempt to escape the fragmentation of the postmodern era and return to a Victorian world of perceived unification and belief in facts. Yet Byatt does not indulge in such nostalgic idealisation of the Victorian era, and the notion of a stable identity is continually questioned, and not only by the post-structuralist Phineas.

Destry-Scholes's three biographical fragments withhold the names of their subjects and Phineas posits two opposing explanations for Destry-Scholes's purpose in creating this 'air of perfunctory secrecy or deception' (*BT*, 96). The first of these is based upon the post-structuralist notion of the uncertainty and instability of identity as well as a denial of the uniqueness of the individual subject. According to this explanation, Phineas suggests that 'it could be argued that Destry-Scholes

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<sup>69</sup> Altick, 11.

himself, in evading the identification of his “characters” for so long, was intending to show that identity, that the self, is a dubious matter, not of the first consequence’ (*BT*, 97). Conversely, Phineas argues that by concealing the names of the figures in his narratives Destry-Scholes actually reinforces their individuality, which is so significant that it does not depend upon the presence of the signifier, the name, to identify it. He says ‘It could equally be argued that he made such a to-do about [concealing the names] because the identity of his people *was* of consequence, because the events he narrated only made sense if the narration concerned these people precisely, and no others’ (*BT*, 97). In discussing Destry-Scholes’s biographical fragments, Phineas encounters a problem of terminology, he decides to adopt the term “personages” for various reasons but ‘[t]he other, more urgent reason, is because “personage” is not, as far as I know, a literary critical term in current use or abuse. (I can’t call them “characters”, or “persons”, or “men”)’ (*BT*, 99). By implication then, the terms “characters”, “persons” and “men” are terms in ‘current use or abuse’ within literary criticism. That the term character is a problematic one for literary criticism reveals the problem of the boundary between history and fiction since it can refer both to a person in a fictional work and the personality of a person. Byatt’s engagement with the boundary between historical and fictional figures will be explored subsequently.

Although biographies present themselves as concerned with truth and facts both novels highlight the fictional nature of any biographical enterprise. The biographers in these novels come to accept the impossibility of ever presenting the entire life of an individual. They recognise that any biographical project is necessarily fictional since it is constructed through selection and the biographer’s



imposition of meaning or order. The biographee's life is retrospectively given meaning by the biographer and thus the meaning that is ascribed will be affected by the biographer's own position in relation to the biographee.

The fictionality of biography is explicitly explored in the presentation of Ibsen in *The Biographer's Tale*. Almost half of this account is presented as a dramatic scene (BT, 88-95) between a "Strange Customer" and "HI". As Phineas's later research reveals, this scene alludes to the fictional encounter between Peer and the "Strange Passenger" in Ibsen's own play, *Peer Gynt*. Thus, Destry-Scholes's biographical account, supposedly historical in its approach, actually adopts a literary framework for presenting its subject. Even when not explicitly adopting fictional modes, Destry-Scholes's biographical accounts hint at the fictionality of all biography. Fulla condemns his account of Linnaeus as 'a tissue of truths and half-truths and untruths, [...] There are inauthentic fabrics here suspended from authentic hooks' (BT, 118-119).

Biography is not merely fictional in its reliance on textual accounts but also in terms of its formal properties. According to George Levine 'the great preoccupation with character [in the nineteenth-century novel was] largely, [...] a moral preoccupation [and] is paralleled by the voracity of the Victorian reading public for biographies and autobiographies'.<sup>70</sup> Yet nineteenth-century biography was not merely related to the nineteenth-century novel in its focus on character, it also shared its structure. For Fraser, the biography followed the fictional models adopted in the realist novel 'Like the *Bildungsroman*, biography and autobiography typically

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<sup>70</sup> George Levine, *The Boundaries of Fiction: Carlyle, Macaulay, Newman* (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1968) 8. See also Fraser and Brown, 131.

follow conventional chronology and an archetypal developmental plot.<sup>71</sup> Yet Levine constructs this relationship in the opposite direction. For him, it is the novel which follows the biographical model: 'The novel itself [... frequently] takes the shape of fictional autobiography, or, if it is narrated in the third person, biography.'<sup>72</sup> By adopting biographical projects in their fictional narratives, Wilson and Byatt explore the complex interrelations between fictional and biographical modes of writing. Yet they are not merely reasserting the postmodern cliché that all history is fictional. Rather, they examine the specific nineteenth-century context of this interrelation of history and fiction and reveal the origin of a practice that continues in present forms of biography.

Although not as obviously raised in *The Dark Clue*, the fictionality of biography is implicitly dealt with. Firstly, that Wilson borrows two characters from Victorian fiction to undertake the biography of an historical figure arouses the reader's suspicions about the novel's relationship to factual history. In providing a biographical account of Walter and Marian, Wilson's novel raises the possibility that his project is no less true than that undertaken by Walter and Marian themselves. Although Turner is an historical figure with an existence outside the confines of Wilson's novel, the image of him that is presented in the novel suggests a fictionalising element even within his own life. Turner's deliberate deceptions concerning his residence and the assumption of pseudonyms highlight the extent to which biography is reconstructed from the public image of the biographee, which is in some sense a "fictional" version of the self. Furthermore, there is a suggestion that accounts of Turner with which Walter and Marian have been provided have been

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<sup>71</sup> Fraser and Brown, 131.

<sup>72</sup> Levine, *Boundaries of Fiction*, 13.

deliberately constructed to present a particular image of the artist for ulterior motives. *The Dark Clue* reveals the multiple fallacies on which biography is based: the self-image of the biographee, the bias of the biographee's associates, and the position of the biographer.

From the outset, Wilson's *The Dark Clue* foregrounds the connection between photography and biography since it is Lady Elizabeth Eastlake, author of an article on photography for the *Quarterly Review*, who asks Walter to undertake a biography of Turner. During their interview Lady Eastlake and Walter discuss the merits of photography. Walter remarks that he does not practice photography because, as a drawing master, he prefers 'pencil and brush' (DC, 8). In response to Lady Eastlake's enquires as to why, Walter replies "'Because it seems to me that photography can merely record facts. [...] Whereas a pencil should, I hope – in the right hands – be able to hint at the truth. Which is not perhaps the same thing'" (DC, 8).

Although Walter prefers pencil and brush in drawing, in his writing he aspires to the condition of photography (DC, 10). This position is elucidated through the discussion of Walter's role in the narrative of *The Woman in White*, which he describes as that of a chronicler, or even an editor. This analogy initially appears entirely appropriate since photography is generally thought to merely present what is placed in front of it, without imposing any interpretation or judgement. This, then, is the same approach adopted by the "lives and letters" mode of biography since its intention is to present the facts of the subject's life without any interpretation or speculation on the part of the biographer. In light of the previous comments regarding photography and painting, however, there is a sense that photography, and

by extension biography, is inadequate. Walter's claim that photography 'merely record[s] facts' raises the possibility that there is something greater which it cannot represent; although Walter retains a higher status for painting he concedes that it can only 'hint at the truth'. Walter suggests that the truth is more than just the sum of the facts and therefore that any medium dedicated to merely recording the facts, and both photography and biography at least attempt that, will not capture the "truth" about their subject. Since Walter's biographical project is undertaken in the spirit of the photographer, these views hint at its ultimate failure.

### **Historical Figures in Fictional Narratives**

These texts not only interrogate the fictional nature of biography but also problematise its relation to history through the complex interaction of fictional and historical figures. Byatt's novel portrays a fictional character who undertakes a biography of the fictional Destry-Scholes, himself the biographer of the fictional Elmer Bole. In her choice of biographers and biographees Byatt flouts the conventions of biographical fiction, which usually presents a fictional biographer-hero engaged in writing a biography of a great figure from history.<sup>73</sup> In contrast to such novels as Barry Unsworth's *Losing Nelson* (1999) and Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), the subject of Phineas's biographical enterprise is not a historical but rather a fictional figure and, indeed, a biographer himself. Wilson's novel initially appears to conform to these conventions since the fictional Marian and Walter undertake a biography of the historical Turner.

Yet such a simplistic opposition between historical and fictional figures is problematised in the novel. Whilst the biographers in Wilson's novel are fictional

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<sup>73</sup> For a discussion of this type of biographical fiction see John F. Keener, *Biography and The Postmodern Historical Novel* (New York: Edwin Mellen, 2001).

characters they do have an existence outside of Wilson's novel. Walter Hartright and Marian Halcombe would be known to readers of Victorian fiction from Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*. Thus, their status as purely fictional characters is challenged. By choosing characters from a previous text and constructing a sequel to it Wilson is, in a sense, providing a biography of those fictional characters. Thus Wilson's novel has two biographical projects: that of Marian and Walter's investigations into the life of Turner and that of Wilson's own imaginings of the lives of Marian and Walter.

This impulse is evident in several neo-Victorian novels which treat the characters of Victorian fiction as real people with a past and a future beyond the original narrative.<sup>74</sup> Similarly, there is a mode of contemporary fiction which presents a fictional account of an "historical" figure, of which Janice Galloway's *Clara* (2002) is a neo-Victorian example.<sup>75</sup> Although none of the texts I discuss adopts this mode, their concern with the historical specificity of the Victorian era necessitates an engagement with historical Victorian figures. This issue has been explored in relation to theories of historical fiction in Chapter 1, where I argued that the incorporation of historical figures was part of neo-Victorian fictions' commitment to the historical specificity of the Victorian era. Thus, their depiction of these figures does not take the form, common in much postmodern fiction, of playing with the known facts of that person's life. Rather they respect the past lives of the Victorian figures they incorporate, even those from Victorian fiction as is the case in *The Dark Clue*, and stress their importance within the cultural context of the

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<sup>74</sup> Perhaps the most notable of these novels is Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), which relates the history of *Jane Eyre*'s Bertha Mason.

<sup>75</sup> Naomi Jacobs designates these as "fiction biographies" and discusses them at length in Chapter 2 of her study *The Character of Truth: Historical Figures in Contemporary Fiction* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1990).



nineteenth century. The text that most vividly engages in this process is Byatt's 'The Conjugal Angel', which incorporates Emily Jesse and so involves the fictionalisation of the life-story of an historical figure. Byatt, however, does not entirely fictionalise Emily Jesse's story but rather imaginatively fills in the gaps that are omitted from official accounts. Thus, whilst clearly writing a fictional account, Byatt remains faithful to the historical specificity of Emily's life.

In *The Biographer's Tale*, Sir Elmer Bole occupies an uneasy position in terms of the division between historical and fictional characters. Although Elmer Bole is a fictional character constructed by Byatt he shares an intertextual life with figures recognisable outside of Byatt's fictional universe: 'He had known everyone', we are told, 'Carlyle, Clough, Palmerston, George Henry Lewes and George Eliot, Richard Watson Dixon, Swinburne, Richard Burton...' (*BT*, 9). Furthermore, Phineas's discussion of the photographs in the biography of Elmer Bole interestingly contributes to his contentious status within the novel. Photographs serve to authenticate the past existence of their subjects since it is the only visual medium that guarantees the subject was present at the point of production. Thus, the photographs of Elmer Bole seem to affirm his status as a historical figure who conversed with other notable Victorians. Yet this is undermined as these photographs are never directly presented to the reader, who is only provided with a verbal description of them. Thus the photographs are translated from the realm of visual to verbal representation; they are recoded in words, a form of representation that does not necessarily have any direct connection with the world they describe. This contrasts to the photographs of Ibsen and Galton which are actually incorporated into the

novel. Consequently, the division between historical and fictional figures is reasserted.

Wilson's *The Dark Clue* raises interesting questions concerning the use and purpose of historical figures within fictional narratives. The distinction between historical and fictional figures is questioned through the incorporation of protagonists from a Victorian novel. Marian and Walter's status reveals the limitations of such a rigid distinction between historical and fictional figures since these characters do have an existence outside of Wilson's narrative, but that existence is within another fictional narrative. Whilst Wilson's adoption of these figures could be interpreted as a postmodern response to the fictionality of history, it should be understood in terms of the specific Victorian context he evokes. Rather than making a general point about the textualisation of history Wilson is more specifically highlighting the extent to which perceptions of the Victorian era are determined by Victorian fiction. Moreover, although Marian and Walter interact with historical Victorians, Ruskin and Eastlake, Wilson maintains a distinction between these two categories of figures. Wilson never allows the reader to forget that Marian and Walter are the fictional protagonists of Collins' *The Woman in White*.

The inclusion of Lady Eastlake is significant for the novel's exploration of the relationship between biography and photography since she instigates the biographical project undertaken by Walter and Marian and, in both the novel and the "real" world, was a keen amateur photographer who wrote articles addressing the subject. Since Lady Eastlake is by no means a famous Victorian the possibility that she is incorporated into the novel in order to lend authenticity to the historical milieu could be undermined. Yet Lady Eastlake's presence within Wilson's novel is

dependent on her significance within the nineteenth-century cultural context.

Wilson's commitment to the historical specificity of the Victorian era precludes the invention of a figure to fulfil Lady Eastlake's function. Instead, he adopts a historical figure and, despite transposing her into his fictional world, retains a sense of her significance within her historical context.

John Ruskin's presence in the novel is equally integral to it and equally dependent on the accepted facts of his life, despite the clichéd status they have acquired. The details of Ruskin's life have permeated the cultural consciousness to a greater extent than those of Lady Eastlake's, and thus the inclusion of Ruskin could be seen as "authenticating" the historical milieu. As with Lady Eastlake though, Ruskin's inclusion in the novel serves a more complex function than that of merely lending verisimilitude to the portrait of the Victorian era. Wilson's narrative deals with deviant sexualities at various levels and thus the incorporation of Ruskin contributes to this engagement with the sexual underworld of Victorian society. The story of Ruskin's failed marriage to Euphemia Chalmers Gray is fairly well-known and has even inspired stage adaptations.<sup>76</sup>

The resonance that Ruskin's name bears is explicitly commented upon by Walter: 'Strange, is it not, how a famous name may produce an image in our minds, composed of who knows what scraps and trifles and odds and ends, yet strong enough, in the absence of personal experience, to *be* that person for us?' (DC, 43). Walter's observation could be seen as a comment on the incorporation of historical figures into much historical fiction, where the depiction of the historical figure depends on the associations conjured up by their name. Yet *The Dark Clue* signals

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<sup>76</sup> I refer to the 1995 Opera *Modern Painters* and the 1999 Off-Broadway play *The Countess*, both of which are discussed in Weltman's 'Victorians on Broadway at the Present Time: John Ruskin's Life on Stage,' *Functions of Victorian Culture*.

its deviance from this strategy in Walter's recognition that the image conjured up by Ruskin's name was based on false perceptions. Not only Walter's, but also the reader's, preconceptions of Ruskin are challenged by his incorporation into the novel. Although Wilson hints at Ruskin's sexual history, his main role within the novel is that of a prominent art critic, reasserting his significance within the art world of nineteenth-century Britain. Thus, whilst aware of the stereotypes about Ruskin, Wilson's commitment to the historical specificity of the Victorian era prevents him from merely perpetuating those stereotypes.

As I have shown, both photography and biography were contentious issues in the nineteenth century, occupying precarious positions in the discourses of history and literature, fact and fiction. Whilst both modes lay claim to historical verifiability, in that they both record the presence of an historical individual, neither is entirely free from the charge of fiction; they are representations of their subjects, framed by the imposition of an order by the biographer and photographer. This problematic position in the discourses of history and literature is replicated in the position of neo-Victorian fiction itself. Neo-Victorian novels are set in a verifiable historical past, verifiable partly through photography itself, and are often at pains to render that past in all its historical specificity. Part of this commitment involves the incorporation of historical figures into the fictional narrative, demonstrating that any imaginative engagement with the Victorian past must be grounded in its historical specificity. Hutcheon identifies this dual approach as a feature of historiographic metafiction which 'acknowledges the paradox of the *reality* of the past but its *textualized accessibility* to us today'.<sup>77</sup> Moreover, these texts' dual positioning in

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<sup>77</sup> Hutcheon, *Poetics* 114.

relation to historical and fictional narration is partly a response to the National Curriculum debates over history in the 1980s/1990s. As demonstrated in the Introduction, this debate centred on the issue of facts-based learning versus a skills-based approach which prioritised empathy. Neo-Victorian texts attempt to reconcile these opposing positions, they promote the need for an imaginative engagement with the past which nevertheless remains committed to its historical specificity.

### **The Relationship Between Biographer and Biographee**

As I have said, the distinction in biographical metafiction between a fictional biographer and a historical biographee is challenged in these texts because of the problematic nature of the boundary between historical and fictional figures. Yet this distinction also has implications for the treatment of biography within these novels. In biography the biographer is subordinate to the biographee; not only is it the biographee that provides the main narrative interest but the biographer is meant to entirely absent themselves from the biography. This situation is evident in the classification of biographies according to their subject rather than their author.

Phineas's decision to write a biography of a biographer subverts the biographical convention that a biographer is meant to be absent from the biographical account and so is always subordinate to the biographee. This convention is adopted in Destry-Scholes's biography of Elmer Bole as there is scant reference to the biographer who authored the work. Biographical fictions that employ a biographer-hero initially appear to construct a similar relationship announcing the biographee as the focus of the novel, as in the titles of such works as *Losing Nelson* and *Flaubert's Parrot*. Yet the biographer in these novels comes to



dominate the story and the reasons for their biographical investigations become more interesting to the reader than the subject they are supposed to be pursuing.

Although a biographer is meant to absent themselves from their work both of these novels reveal the impossibility of achieving that and, indeed, they are more concerned with the biographers' narratives than with their biographical subjects.<sup>78</sup> In *The Biographer's Tale* the manuscript the reader is presented with is actually an autobiographical account of Phineas's biographical searches. Despite his proclamations that 'the last thing I have any interest in writing – I mean this – is an autobiography' (*BT*, 99), Phineas finally acknowledges that his writing has become precisely that. 'I have admitted I am writing a story, a story which in a haphazard (aleatory) way has become a first-person story, and, from being a story of a search told in the first person, has become, I have to recognise – a first-person story proper, an autobiography' (*BT*, 250). The fact that Phineas succumbs to writing an autobiography can be seen as a comment on the nature of biography and the position of the biographer. Prior to this revelation that he is writing an autobiography, which the reader has long since suspected, Phineas recognises the biographer's need for a stable sense of his own identity. He claims 'I am not very good at finding out who Scholes Destry-Scholes was because I am not very interested in finding out who I am' (*BT*, 100). In the biographical process, the biographer's identity becomes subordinated, and possibly even subsumed, into that of their subject, in order to understand their subject the biographer almost has to become the biographee. Thus a definite sense of self is necessary for the biographer to prevent a complete and

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<sup>78</sup> In *Possession*, Mortimer Cropper self-consciously comments upon the impossibility of the biographer absenting himself from his biography. Whilst lecturing on biography he allows his silhouette to intrude on the displays: 'On one of these occasions he would laugh, apologise, and say half-seriously, carefully scripted, *there* you see the biographer, a component of the picture, a moving shadow, not to be forgotten among the things he works with' (*P*, 385).

dangerous identification with their subject.<sup>79</sup> It is not only that a biographical project requires an autobiographical awareness from the biographer as a precondition of existence, but that autobiography itself can be seen as a biographical project. Autobiography involves a similar distinction between the biographer and biographee since the self that writes the autobiography is never the same as the self that is written within it. This notion is suggested in Destry-Scholes's third document when he quotes the dramatist as saying 'To write is to sit in judgement on oneself' (*BT*, 80). Since writing involves 'Division and self-division' (*BT*, 81) autobiography becomes biography as the self that narrates is divided from and sits in judgement upon the self that is narrated.

Similarly, as it progresses *The Dark Clue* becomes less concerned with Turner than with the lives of his biographers, Marian and Walter. Most of the novel is told through the intimate diaries and letters of Marian and Walter. As I stated earlier, the adoption of this narrative technique contributes to the novel's treatment of biography since letters and diaries are often the primary sources from which biographical accounts are derived, particularly in the "lives and letters" mode so favoured in the nineteenth century. Yet both modes raise the problematic distinction between biography and autobiography. This is especially true of journals since they are written for the self, yet it is always a different self that reads it than wrote it and so journals are necessarily involved in the process of division and self-division that transforms the autobiographical project into a biographical one.

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<sup>79</sup> The dangers of too close an identification with the biographical subject are explored in Barry Unsworth's *Losing Nelson*. In the course of writing his biography the parallels Charles Cleasby initially notices between his own life and that of Nelson multiply to the point where Charles's own sense of identity and self-worth is dependent on Nelson's.

The intimate connection between biography and autobiography raised by Phineas is similarly evident in *The Dark Clue*. Marian's discoveries concerning the repressed elements of Turner's life are simultaneous with the realisation of her own repressed desires. Thus, it is through the biographical process that Marian makes sense of her own autobiographical narrative. Although the revelations about Turner provide Marian with useful insights into her own psyche the dangers of too close an identification between the biographer and biographee are explored through Walter's relations to his subject. As his investigations into Turner progress Walter's identity begins to merge with Turner's, he adopts the pseudonym used by Turner and his personality alters in consequence. Recalling his discussions with Farrant, Walter notes 'I laughed – or rather Jenkinson did, for I could barely recognize the sly, cynical, man-to-man sneer that issued from my lips as my own' (DC, 173). Later, Walter actually begins to re-enact scenes from Turner's life when he engages in sexual relations with a prostitute in the same manner that, apparently, Turner himself had liked. Once again, he adopts the pseudonym Jenkinson in this encounter. Walter's own personality becomes more dissolved after this event, to the extent that he rapes his sister-in-law Marian in her own bed. A psychoanalytical explanation of these events might suggest that the adoption of Turner's pseudonym distances Walter from his innermost desires; it is only through this persona that he is able to realise those desires. Thus in renouncing his identity Walter is actually able to uncover his "true self".

This complete identification and absorption of the biographee's identity by the biographer is not really allowed for in *The Biographer's Tale* since Phineas is prevented from ever apprehending his biographee. As a biographer himself, Destroy-

Scholes is absent from the novel except in relation to his subjects, despite Phineas's repeated attempts to discover the man behind the biographies. The failure of Phineas's biographical project is connected to the lack of a photographic record of Destry-Scholes and Phineas's searches are framed by his encounters with photographs, or rather the lack of them. The absence of biographical information on Destry-Scholes on his biography of Elmer Bole is compounded by the absence of the expected author-photograph (*BT*, 7). The lack of biographical and photographic evidence prompts Phineas's project but he is forced to abort it when faced with yet another absent photograph of Destry-Scholes. Phineas believes he is finally about to encounter 'the face of Destry-Scholes' (*BT*, 249) in a photograph accompanying the newspaper article on his disappearance. Yet the photograph only reinscribes the absence of Destry-Scholes: 'The photograph that accompanied this text was of a dark rowboat, floating on a choppy dark water, with three gull-colonised rocks and a stocky mountain in the background' (*BT*, 249).

### **Biography and Photography as Memorials**

As the photographs of Destry-Scholes explicitly reveal, photographs can represent an absence as well as a presence, in fact, all photographs denote an absence. A photograph captures a presence since it is a trace of the thing presented; in preserving that presence, however, the photograph signals the fact that it is no longer there and thus actually signifies an absence. This absence foreshadows the death that will ultimately cause the permanent absence of the figure in the photograph. In Barthes's terms '[b]y giving me the absolute past of the pose (aorist), the photograph tells me death in the future. [...] Whether or not the subject is already

dead, every photograph is this catastrophe'.<sup>80</sup> Biography similarly exists in a paradoxical relationship to presence and absence since it provides a trace of the subject, proof that they did exist, whilst simultaneously showing that they no longer exist.<sup>81</sup> Although photography and biography are related to death they can also be seen as a means to avoid the eternal absence of death. Despite acknowledging that 'all biographers, unless they take the risk of embalming a living subject, must end their [... story] with death', Margaret Atwood also recognises that biography can provide a means to cheat death since 'a good biography makes the dead feel less dead'.<sup>82</sup> In a similar vein, Jürgen Schläeger contends that 'biography gives life an extension. It is, as such, one of the most successful efforts at secular resurrection'.<sup>83</sup> The prevalence of photographic albums and, more frequently in the Victorian era, pictures of the dead, suggests photography's role in preserving the memory of the dead.

This connection between photography and death is explicitly explored in *The Biographer's Tale* through its inclusion of photographs of Galton and Ibsen on their death-beds. Yet as Phineas remarks, 'The photographs of the truly dead are not shocking as the photographs of the living are shocking. For one thing, their eyes are decently closed, and not dead paper spaces' (*BT*, 179). His descriptions of some of the other photographs in Destry-Scholes's shoe-box demonstrate the more eerie quality that photographs of living subjects possess. Of Julia Margaret Cameron's

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<sup>80</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 96.

<sup>81</sup> This alliance between biography and death can be seen as a wry comment on the post-structuralist claims about the Death of the Author. If the author as agent and originator of the meaning of a text is dead then the purpose of literary biography is diminished.

<sup>82</sup> Margaret Atwood, 'Biographobia: some personal reflections on the act of biography,' *Nineteenth-Century Lives: Essays presented to Jerome Hamilton Buckley* Eds. Laurence S. Lockridge, John Maynard and Donald D. Stone (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989): 7.

<sup>83</sup> Jürgen Schläeger, 'Biography: Cult as Culture,' *The Art of Literary Biography*, ed. John Batchelor (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995) 57-71, 68.



photographs of women, Phineas remarks ‘These were impressions on the photographic plate of living, breathing flesh, and warm hair [...] all imitating the stillness of death for the long attention of the lady under the velvet pall, all now bones and dust [...]’ (BT, 179). It is the opposition between the original presence of the subject and the mere representation of them in the photograph that makes these photographs truly shocking. Since there was no “presence”, no soul, in the dead men, the pictures of them do not denote absence in the same way.

As I have already discussed, the anxieties surrounding memory and forgetting were particularly acute in the nineteenth century and photography provided a means to guarantee the preservation of both personal and cultural memory. In *The Biographer’s Tale* Phineas explicitly draws the connection between photography and memory in his metaphorical association of the two processes: ‘[...] I remember clearly, some memories ingrain themselves like light on photographic film’ (BT, 152). This analogy was drawn in the nineteenth century itself as in William Benjamin Carpenter’s discussion of memory in *Principles of Mental Physiology* (1874). Whilst Phineas adopts the metaphor in order to assert the truth of certain memories, Carpenter is more aware of photography’s and memory’s troubled relationship to the question of truth. Carpenter acknowledges the need for the ‘application of particular chemical re-agents’ in the photographic process and similarly recognises the effect that such ‘re-agents’ can have on memory.<sup>84</sup>

Vera explicitly makes this connection between photography and memory when discussing a photograph of herself as a young child with her mother. She remembers that ‘I was given the photograph to remember my mother by, when she

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<sup>84</sup> Carpenter, ‘Of Memory,’ 155-56.

died' yet, as she goes on to say, 'It's a memorial of me, as well as her' (BT, 185). That someone would need a memorial of themselves suggests that the self is not fixed and unified but something which changes over time. Although the photograph would seem to serve as an aid to memory it also hinders it: 'We use snaps to remember who we were, but that causes us to remember *only* those snaps' (BT, 185). Since a photograph only records an instant of time it actually prevents the recollection of the fullness of the past because those photographs come to stand in for that past and so efface it.

Although biographies can be written whilst the subject is still alive their narrative mode presupposes the death of the subject since it is meant to encompass the whole of the subject's life, including their death. Phineas similarly makes this connection when he remarks that 'I began to think in a mad way that a biography was a kind of snuff movie, that there was an element of *schadenfreude* in piecing together long-dead pleasures and pain' (BT, 190). Thus, both photography and biography are inextricably implicated in death and absence. Yet they both record a presence and as such provide a memorial to the subject, a way for them to exist even after death.

## Secondariness

In both novels the narrative technique serves to highlight the secondariness of biography. The reader is denied direct access to Turner and Destry-Scholes and can only approach them through the mediating consciousnesses of Marian, Walter and Phineas.<sup>85</sup> This replicates the position of the reader of a biography since their access

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<sup>85</sup> In *Possession* Byatt does provide the reader with direct access to the subjects of her protagonists' biographical investigations, Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte. The most prominent example of this is Chapter 15 which recounts their trip to Yorkshire through an omniscient third-

to the subject is always mediated through the biographer. Moreover, it also reflects the position of the biographer themselves since a biographer usually embarks on the project after his subject's death and so cannot speak to the subject themselves but rather has to rely on the recollections of others. This is clearly the case in *The Dark Clue* since Marian and Walter constantly encounter reminiscences of Turner in the letters and journals of other characters yet rarely come across traces of the man himself. The only exception to this is the fragment of a poem written by Turner in his youth and retained by Mrs Bennett (*DC*, 138). Although Phineas initially appears to have more success in discovering his subjects written remains they equally distance him from his subject. Despite discovering Destry-Scholes's lecture notes, card index and biographical fragments, Phineas is no nearer finding out anything about the man himself since all these pertain to the art of biography and Destry-Scholes's subjects rather than the biographer himself.

*The Biographer's Tale* signifies its secondary status through its Chinese-box narrative structure. With the exception of Phineas's, all of the narratives in the novel are mediated to the reader through several different narrative layers. Thus, Sir Elmer Bole is encountered through Phineas's reading of Destry-Scholes's biography. Similarly, the figures of Galton, Linnaeus and Ibsen only exist in the text through Phineas's reading of the biographical fragments constructed by Destry-Scholes. The most forceful illustration of the novel's secondariness is Phineas's decision to write on Destry-Scholes. In choosing to write a biography about a biographer Phineas appears to be commenting on the nature of postmodern society, in which we have become so removed from the historical process that there are no longer any heroes

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person narrator rather than through the textual remains encountered until that point. This aspect of Byatt's novel will be explored in more detail in Chapter 6.

left to write about. Indeed, Phineas himself recognises this condition ‘Bole [...] crammed more action into one life than would be available to three or four puny moderns’ (BT, 8).<sup>86</sup> Yet the notion that this feeling of secondariness or belatedness is exclusive to the postmodern era is undermined in the novel since Elmer Bole himself had a similar anxiety in relation to the past, lamenting “‘There were giants in those days’” (BT, 8). Once again, then, accounts of postmodernism prove reductive for considerations of neo-Victorian fiction. Rather the treatment of secondariness in this novel should be understood in terms of its concern with the modes of biography and photography.

This notion of secondariness is useful for the relationship of these texts to the Victorian era. Many accounts of neo-Victorianism claim that it is fuelled by a nostalgic desire to return to the Victorian era. In biography, both in its “pure” forms and fictional variations, the life of the subject is mediated to the reader through the biographer. Similarly, in neo-Victorian fiction the Victorian world is mediated to the reader through the retrospective stance of the twentieth century. Since secondariness is the condition of neo-Victorian fiction the question arises as to whether these novels can be said to exist in their own right, as independent and unique works of art, or whether they are merely parasitic on their predecessors’s texts. These texts are clearly aware of the legacy of Victorian literature and culture and seek to incorporate it into their texts rather than efface it. This is most discernible in the case of Wilson’s *The Dark Clue*, which exists as a sequel to Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White*.

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<sup>86</sup> This attitude can be seen in the BBC Great Britons Debate in which two Victorian figures, Charles Darwin and Isambard Kingdom Brunel, were voted into the top 10.

Biography and photography are both modes of representation in which the very fact of representation is effaced so that all that is seen is that which is represented. The neo-Victorian texts that chose not to adopt a twentieth-century frame, as is the case in *The Dark Clue*<sup>87</sup>, can be seen as attempting something similar to the photograph in posing as Victorian texts. Yet as I have shown, neither photography nor biography can ever achieve this ideal since the figures of the biographer and the photographer always affect the presentation of the subject. Similarly, the presentation of the nineteenth century in these novels can never completely escape the twentieth-century frame of the author and reader. In fact, these authors do not attempt to escape the twentieth century; they are aware of when they are writing and recognise the differences between Victorian and contemporary society. The notion of secondariness not only implies mediation but also a devaluation of the secondary form. Neither photographs nor biographies provide access to the subject; access is always mediated as they only ever provide a representation of the subject. Thus both modes are deemed inadequate for capturing the reality of their subjects; there is always something that cannot be grasped. Similarly, neo-Victorian fiction cannot provide unmediated access to the Victorian past; the depictions are always mediated by the twentieth-century consciousness of their authors. Yet this does not necessarily entail a devaluation of neo-Victorian fiction as merely a secondary and imitative form of Victorian fiction. Rather neo-Victorian fictions explicitly reject the possibility of perfect imitation because of their commitment to the historical specificity of the Victorian era.

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<sup>87</sup> Of the other neo-Victorian novels under consideration in this thesis only *Angels and Insects* and *The Quincunx: The Inheritance of John Huffam* locate their action entirely within the nineteenth century.



## Chapter Six

### Resurrecting the Past: Neo-Victorian Fiction and Spiritualism

In recreating the Victorian past, Byatt's neo-Victorian fictions enact a process of resurrecting the dead; in writing these texts, Byatt becomes a medium through which the voices of the past speak.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, all neo-Victorian texts are involved in this process as they resurrect the figures, forms and/or cultural milieu of the Victorian era. Thus, for instance, Wilson's *The Dark Clue* resurrects the protagonists of Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*, providing them with a fictional afterlife. Nowhere is this process more vivid than in Byatt's two neo-Victorian ghost stories: *Possession* and 'The Conjugal Angel'.<sup>2</sup>

In an article on Byatt's neo-Victorian texts, Hilary Schor designates the form of *Angels and Insects* as "ghostwriting", which she claims Byatt reads in a double sense. The first of these refers to the process of "borrowings" or "writing like" which for Schor 'seem[s] to approach the postmodern forms of pastiche'.<sup>3</sup> This aspect of Byatt's technique has been explored in Chapter 1 which was dedicated to the process of ventriloquism. The second sense of ghostwriting refers to 'speaking with the dead, not so much as writers but as mouldering bodies, decaying forms'.<sup>4</sup> Despite identifying this literal sense of ghostwriting in Byatt's texts, Schor neglects it in favour of the metaphorical sense, focusing on Byatt's ghostwriting of the

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<sup>1</sup> Byatt's position as a medium has been noted by several reviewers. See Mary Hawthorne, 'Winged Victoriana,' rev. of *Angels and Insects*, by A. S. Byatt, *New Yorker* 21 June 1993: 98-100, 100; and Victoria Glendinning, 'Angels and ministers of graciousness,' rev. of *Angels and Insects*, by A. S. Byatt, *The Times*, Saturday Review 7 Nov. 1992: 45.

<sup>2</sup> Although this process has not been explicitly identified in relation to *Possession* the titles of two reviews indicate an implicit recognition of the novel's involvement in the resurrection of the past. Richard Jenkins, 'Disinterring buried lives,' *TLS* 2-8 March 1990: 213-214; and Jay Parini, 'Unearthing the Secret Lover,' *New York Times* 21 Oct 1990: 9+.

<sup>3</sup> Hilary M. Schor, 'Sorting, Morphing, and Mourning: A. S. Byatt Ghostwrites Victorian Fiction,' *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century*, eds. John Kucich and Dianne F. Sadoff (Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 2000): 234-251, 237.

<sup>4</sup> Schor, 237.

Victorian realist novel. In discussing *Possession* and 'The Conjugal Angel' I want to restore the literal dimension of ghostwriting by focusing on these texts' incorporation of spiritualist elements, notably séances and manifestations, and relating them to the late-nineteenth-century forms of spiritualism.

In his review of *Angels and Insects* Levenson claims that the presence of Arthur Hallam's ghost in 'The Conjugal Angel' elicits 'an unnerving double response' from the reader, moving from the initial stage of mockery to the 'less cozy recognition that we novel readers are always seeing ghosts'.<sup>5</sup> Although, as Levenson implies, all fiction involves a process of raising the dead, or rather those who have never been alive, that is purely fictional creations, Byatt's use of ghosts, in *Possession* as well as 'The Conjugal Angel', needs to be understood in terms of the 'double response' he attributes to her readers. The resurrection of ghosts in these texts is not only a consequence of their status as fictions but, also their status as historiographic metafiction; these texts resurrect the figures of a past age. Furthermore, the specific historical locale of these texts has implications for their inclusion of ghosts. The Victorian period Byatt recreates in these texts was itself interested in ghosts, as evidenced in the popularity of ghost stories and the growth of the cultural phenomenon of spiritualism.<sup>6</sup>

Byatt's interest in spiritualism is indicated in the titles of both texts. The title "possession" clearly connects the novel to the spiritual worlds and "conjugal angel" is a Swedenborgian term relating to his theory that humans are angels that have been split in two and will be rejoined in "conjugal love" in the hereafter. Moreover, Byatt

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Levenson, 'The Religion of Fiction,' rev. of *Angels and Insects*, by A. S. Byatt, *New Republic* 2 Aug 1993: 44.

<sup>6</sup> Julia Briggs identifies the end of the nineteenth century as representing 'the high-water mark' of ghost fiction. *Night Visitors: The Rise and Fall of the English Ghost Story* (London: Faber and Faber, 1977) 14.

chooses an extract from Robert Browning's 'Mr Sludge, the Medium' as one of the epigraphs to *Possession*. As neo-Victorian fictions, Byatt's texts are concerned with recreating the specificity of the Victorian past. The differing locations of *Possession* and 'The Conjugal Angel' enable Byatt to present a complex account of spiritualism's position within nineteenth-century society. The nineteenth-century elements of *Possession* occur in the late 1850s/early 1860s, when spiritualism was beginning to emerge as a popular cultural phenomenon in England. In contrast, 'The Conjugal Angel' occupies a slightly later historical moment (1875) by which point spiritualism had become more acceptable within respectable society. The position spiritualism occupies within these texts depends on the specificity of these historical locations. In *Possession*, spiritualism is just one of many aspects of mid- to late-nineteenth-century culture which Byatt evokes; by 'The Conjugal Angel', it has become the central feature.

Spiritualism obviously answered certain needs within Victorian culture as it became increasingly popular throughout the century. Indeed, 'Even Queen Victoria and Gladstone were known to have dabbled' and public acceptance reached its apogee with the establishment of the British National Association of Spiritualists in 1874.<sup>7</sup> In her study of nineteenth-century spiritualism, *The Darkened Room* (1989), Alex Owen notes that 'Spiritualism emerged contemporaneously with the consideration of women's proper role and sphere which became known as "the woman question"'.<sup>8</sup> In *The Trial of Woman: Feminism and the Occult Sciences in Victorian Literature and Society* (1992), Diana Basham extends this argument, claiming that spiritualism actually provided a means through which legal, political

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<sup>7</sup> Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Nineteenth Century England* (London: Virago, 1989) 19, 25.

<sup>8</sup> Owen, 1.

and educational rights for women could be achieved. She claims that spiritualism provided 'a chance to demonstrate, through the fantasy control of the seance, that the hidden powers of the "female medium" did not offer any ultimate or immediate challenge to the security of the social order [...]'.<sup>9</sup> As these two accounts suggest, women's involvement in spiritualism was contradictory, it both challenged the roles of women by bringing them into the public sphere and conformed to traditional conceptions of femininity in its privileging of passivity. In engaging with the phenomenon of spiritualism, then, Byatt's texts implicitly address the position of women within Victorian society.

Although the phenomenon of spiritualism had implications for conceptions of femininity, it was also clearly related to Victorian attitudes towards religion. According to Basham 'the elaborate rituals of Victorian mourning [...] testify to an experience of death which neither religious consolation nor medical science were at all adequate either to prevent, cure or assuage'.<sup>10</sup> Equally unable to prevent or cure the experience of death, spiritualism was at least able to assuage the grief that so often accompanied it. As such, spiritualism provided, for some, an alternative to religion, a new faith; yet it was a specifically secular religion, 'more or less independent of the concept of God'.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Owen claims that, despite being opposed to the 'gross materialism' of the age, spiritualism 'proposed a new metaphysical cosmology based upon an (albeit rarefied) form of matter'.<sup>12</sup> This secular religion necessitated a reconfiguration of biblical representations of heaven; it was re-imagined as a continuation of middle-class domesticity rather than a

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<sup>9</sup> Diana Basham, *The Trial of Woman: Feminism and the Occult Sciences in Victorian Literature and Society* (London: Macmillan: 1992) ix.

<sup>10</sup> Basham, 113.

<sup>11</sup> Basham, 113.

<sup>12</sup> Owen, xvii.

mystical and unimaginable place. As Basham states, 'While Spiritualism dramatically narrowed the divide between the living and the dead, it also [...] effectively stripped the dead of any transcendental significance'.<sup>13</sup>

Through their depiction of nineteenth-century spiritualism *Possession* and 'The Conjugal Angel' interrogate systems of belief. Any possibility of an either/or distinction between belief and scepticism, ghosts and reality, however, is deconstructed.<sup>14</sup> Instead of a simple opposition, Byatt's texts reveal the coexistence of belief and scepticism in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

### **Sceptical Belief**

In both *Possession* and 'The Conjugal Angel' the narrator is distanced from the spiritualist elements of the narrative, seemingly constructing an opposition between the credulous characters and the sceptical narrator. In *Possession* this would appear to translate to an opposition between nineteenth-century belief and twentieth-century scepticism and, indeed, the nineteenth-century séance is mediated to the reader through a variety of textual accounts. The reader first encounters Mrs Lees' séances through LaMotte's correspondence with Ash. LaMotte seems to speak from a position of belief and directs herself to Ash's supposed position of scepticism: '*I hope you may be convinced that Mrs Lees' seances are worthy of your serious consideration. They bring such unspeakable Comfort – to the deeply grieving*' (*P*, 191). The reader is subsequently given an account of Ash's attendance at Mrs Lees' séances, although their access to this account is mediated through Blackadder.

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<sup>13</sup> Basham, 115.

<sup>14</sup> Indeed, such a simplistic opposition was untenable even in the nineteenth century. See [H. L. Mansel], 'Modern Spiritualism,' *The Quarterly Review* 114 (1863): 179-210.



In a footnote to *Mummy Possesst*, Blackadder notes that Ash attended at least two of Mrs Lees' séances yet he seems unsure of Ash's motivation: 'Whilst there can be no doubt that the poet went to the seances in a spirit of rational enquiry, rather than with any predisposition to believe what he saw, he records the medium's activities with sharp distaste and fear, rather than with simple contempt for chicanery' (*P*, 299). The twentieth-century biographer not only distances himself from the phenomenon of spiritualism but also appears to attribute his own scepticism to his nineteenth-century subject. The reader is finally granted an apparently unmediated version of events in Mrs Lees' own account of the séance attended by Ash and LaMotte. As it transpires, however, Mrs Lees' memoirs are supplemented by the notes made by Miss Judge since her spiritual activity renders her unconscious for a period of the séance. This act of ventriloquism within Mrs Lees' memoirs replicates the act of ventriloquism in which she participates as a spiritualist medium.

Thus, the reader experiences the séance through a complex process of meta-reading: the account of the séance is taken from Miss Judge's notes, incorporated into Mrs Lees' memoirs, which Blackadder is reading. This technique of meta-reading establishes narratorial distance, suggesting a desire to distinguish the twentieth-century characters' and narrator's scepticism from the belief of the nineteenth-century characters, and appears to align the reader with the sceptical response. Yet this technique is adopted for the majority of the nineteenth-century events within this novel; it is a consequence of the novel's structural composition, rather than its attitude towards spiritualism. Moreover, such a simplistic opposition is complicated by the revelation of the complex attitudes held by the nineteenth-century characters towards spiritualism.

Despite prefacing his comment with 'there can be no doubt', Blackadder is less than certain of Ash's attitude towards spiritualism. Ash's motivation is further problematised by the revelation that he attended the séance to discover what had happened to his child. Yet this does not necessarily make a believer out of him, it is possible that he merely used the séance as a pretext for confronting Christabel. Equally, however, Ash is not completely sceptical of spiritualism. In response to LaMotte's discussion of spirit-rapping, Ash writes '*I am not, as some are, whether for religious or for sceptical reasons, convinced that they are nothing – the kind of nothing that emanates from human weakness and gullibility [...]*' (P, 171). Yet he concedes that '*Fraud is a possible and probable explanation for much*' (P, 171).

LaMotte's attitude is similarly resistant to classification as either absolute belief or absolute scepticism. Although she attends Mrs Lees' séances and encourages Ash to take an interest in spiritualism, there is no suggestion that this is done in anything other than a spirit of rational enquiry. She informs Ash that she and Blanche attended a lecture on Spiritual Manifestations '*but with no vulgar desire to be shocked or startled*' (P, 170). By the time Ash attends a séance, however, she appears to be moving towards a belief in spiritualism; she attends as a member of the Vestal Lights, a group of 'marvellously sensitive women' who gathered together 'for the purpose of sustained enquiry into spiritual Truth' (P, 395).

In contrast to *Possession*, 'The Conjugal Angel' is set entirely in the nineteenth century and thus the séances are only mediated to the reader through the narrator, rather than through textual reports or the perspectives of twentieth-century characters. The credibility of Mrs Papagay and Sophy's spiritualist activities, however, is subtly undermined throughout the opening description of them. The

words ‘suspect’ and ‘apparently’ (‘CA’, 163) qualify the descriptions of these two characters, raising the possibility that things are not what they seem. Moreover, Mrs Papagay’s vision of the angel in the clouds is revealed as a product of her imagination: ‘She knew she was straining. She desired *so* to see the invisible inhabitants of the sky [...]’ (‘CA’, 164). In foregrounding this explanation the message Mrs Papagay later transmits from Mrs Hearnshaw’s children is undermined as a true spirit communication by the possibility that she was straining her imagination in order to provide comfort to the grieving Mrs Hearnshaw (‘CA’, 197). That Mrs Papagay in some way fakes the message to Mrs Hearnshaw, either consciously or unconsciously, is indicated by her belief that ‘she must take a hand, if the hunger was to be met and not magnified. She wanted a *good* message for the poor bereft woman [...]’ (‘CA’, 196).

As with *Possession*, this technique of distancing the narrator from absolute credulity in the spiritualist activities is a consequence of its status as a neo-Victorian text. Yet again, a simplistic opposition between nineteenth-century belief and twentieth-century scepticism is forestalled. Despite this distancing of the narrator, there is a suggestion that there may be some truth in Mrs Papagay’s activities. When she begins the passive writing the narrator describes how ‘There was always a moment of fear when her hand began to move, without any volition on her part’ (‘CA’, 196). Whilst this might not entirely convince a sceptic it dispels any suspicion that Mrs Papagay is consciously participating in a fraud, although the possibility of an unconscious fraud remains.

In distinguishing between conscious and unconscious fraud I am adopting the framework proposed by Owen in *The Darkened Room*. Owen posits three possible

categories of explanation: the first dismisses spiritual activity as the result of a deliberate fraud by the mediums; the second explanation posits spiritual activity as the result of an ‘unconscious production’ by the medium; whilst the third possible explanation is that the spirit activity is genuine.<sup>15</sup> Owen’s account of spiritualist activity relates to the varying responses provoked within the nineteenth century itself; indeed, contemporary commentators also proposed the possibility that spiritual activity was perceived because of the audience’s desire to see and believe.<sup>16</sup>

The “prophecy” of Mrs Hearnshaw’s dead children, that she is expecting another child, transpires to be true; this undermines the possibility of unconscious fraud since Mrs Papagay had no prior knowledge of the expected arrival. Indeed, Mrs Papagay is ‘somewhat appalled at the certainty with which the spirits had proclaimed both that Mrs Hearnshaw was expecting another little one and that this little one would be a girl. She *preferred* the messages to be more tactfully ambiguous [...]’ (‘CA’, 198-99). Although Mrs Papagay’s preference for ambiguous messages can be interpreted as an act of unconscious fraud, this spirit communication does not conform to that practice suggesting its independence from Mrs Papagay’s interference. Although the narrator initially seeks to distance themselves from the spiritualist activity, in narrating this event without passing any overt judgement on its veracity the reader is left to form their own conclusions.

The narrator’s position alternates between scepticism and belief; the description of séances as a bourgeois form of entertainment undermines its pretensions to truth. At the first séance Mr Hawke organises the seating

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<sup>15</sup> Owen, xix.

<sup>16</sup> See Mansel, 187; and Fitzjames Stephen, ‘Spiritualism,’ *The Cornhill Magazine* 7 (1863): 706-719. Brewster claimed that this desire led the participants to, unconsciously, provide the mediums with clues to their situation. David Brewster, ‘Works on Mental Philosophy, Mesmerism, Electro-Biology & c.,’ *The North British Review* 22 (1854): 179-224, 217.

arrangements in ‘a kind of parody of dinner-party placement when there were insufficient men’ (‘CA’, 187). The entertaining elements of the séance are even more apparent in the second instance. Sophy’s attempt to describe the apparition she sees prompts Mrs Jesse’s recollection of an observation that “‘Angels are only a clumsy form of poultry’” (‘CA’, 202). As this irreverent levity shows ‘The séance, even at its most intense, visionary and tragic, retained elements of the parlour game’ (‘CA’, 202). The narrator accounts for this attitude by claiming it as a kind of defence mechanism: ‘It was not that Mrs Jesse did not believe that Sophy Sheekhy saw her Visitor; it was patently clear that she did; it was more that there were all sorts of pockets of disbelief, scepticism, comfortable and comforting unacknowledged animal *unawareness* of the unseen, which acted as checks and encouraged a kind of cautious normalness’ (‘CA’, 202-203).

The nineteenth-century characters’ approach towards spiritualism is similarly more complex than a simplistic opposition between nineteenth-century belief and twentieth-century scepticism allows. For certain characters, spiritualism provides a much needed source of comfort. It soon becomes apparent that Mrs Hearnshaw’s attendance at the séances provides a means for her to cope with the grief of losing five daughters in infancy. It is assumed by all present, and the reader, that Mrs Jesse attends the séances in the hope of receiving a communication from her dead fiancé, Arthur Hallam. Even characters who enquire in a seemingly objective manner about the nature of spiritualism have personal reasons for attending séances. Mrs Papagay’s interest in spiritualism initially stems from her desire to know whether her husband, Arturo, is alive or drowned at sea; yet she is unsure of her belief: ‘She herself knew Sophy was not acting, but could not see what Sophy had seen. [...] she



*knew* it was all a parlour game, at one level, a kind of communal story-telling, or charade, even whilst she held Sophy's mortally cold hands' ('CA', 285). Ash similarly has personal reasons for attending a séance; to discover what happened to his illegitimate child. The personal motivations of Mrs Papagay and Ash affect their approach to spiritualism, it prevents them from adopting a merely sceptical stance.

By incorporating Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, Byatt reveals the complex attitudes of the Victorians to the issues of death and the after-life. The stanzas incorporated into 'The Conjugal Angel' meditate on the possibilities of an after-life for both Hallam and Tennyson, most apparent in the stanzas in which Tennyson appears to achieve communion with the dead Arthur: 'So word by word, and line by line, / The dead man touched me from the past' ('CA', 266). In Tennyson's poem, the desire to communicate with the dead takes on a physical dimension, much as it did in the spiritualist circles of the late-nineteenth century. Tennyson's poem is seen as representative of the anxieties surrounding religion that beset the Victorian era, anxieties that are articulated in perhaps the most famous lines of the poem: 'There lives more faith in honest doubt, / Believe me, than in half the creeds' (96, l. 11-12). The oscillation between doubt and belief dramatised in *In Memoriam* was recognised as representing the spirit of the age almost as soon as it was published and the identification of many readers with the opinions expressed in the poem certainly contributed to Tennyson's appointment as Poet Laureate in the same year. A review of *In Memoriam* claims that 'Its title has already become a household word among us. Its deep feeling, its wide sympathies, [...] its true religion, will soon be not less so. The sooner the better'.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> [Franklin Lushington] 'In Memoriam,' *Tait's Magazine* 17 (1850): 499-505, 505.

In 'The Conjugal Angel' the communication with the dead in séances is enacted through the narrative process itself. During the séance the narrative constantly moves backwards to recount past instances in the characters' lives, yet the communications with the dead actually reaffirm the importance of the living. Mrs Hearnshaw's dead daughters instruct her to abandon the name Amy for her unborn child, which each of her five dead daughters had been given, in favour of Rosamund: *'Rose of this Earth so we hope she may stay with you a little'* ('CA', 198). When Sophy communicates Arthur's message that 'they shall be joined, and made one Angel. In the hereafter, that is' ('CA', 283) to Mrs Jesse, Emily surprises the circle by declaring it to be 'an extremely unfair arrangement' ('CA', 283). Emily Jesse's communication with the dead Arthur strengthens the bond with her living husband. This triumph of the living over the dead is prefigured by Mrs Papagay's motive for participating in séances, 'it was for *now*, it was for more life *now*, it was not for the Hereafter which would be as it was, as it always had been' ('CA', 171). Byatt's wish to prioritise the living over the dead can be inferred from the return of Arturo at the end of the novella.

### **Summoning Spirits**

'The Conjugal Angel' incorporates two instances which can be interpreted as spiritual manifestations. During the initial séance Sophy states that "There is something in the room [...] A living creature." ('CA', 201). Sophy struggles to describe this manifestation, claiming that "A lot of the colours don't have names." ('CA', 201). In fact, she declares that the spirit itself is hostile to her attempts to describe it "in demeaning human words and comparisons [...]" ('CA', 202). Whilst the spiritualists would see this as proof that there was another world beyond

the comprehension of humans, a more sceptical observer might suspect that it provides a convenient means of circumventing awkward questions.

Interestingly, the most vivid spiritual manifestation in the novella occurs not within the confines of the séance but in the privacy of Sophy's bedroom, when Sophy conjures the ghost of Arthur Hallam. Rather than appearing as some heavenly form, Arthur's spirit manifests as 'a dead man' who brings with him 'a sudden gust of odour, not rose, not violet, but earth-mould and corruption' ('CA', 249). During this manifestation, Sophy Sheekhy herself takes on a kind of ghostly existence. Staring into the mirror, Sophy becomes aware that 'She was everywhere and nowhere. She stared into the pupils of her eyes [...] and there was nothing, there was no one there' ('CA', 243-44). This loss of identity can be a precursor to spirit activity, the effacement of the medium's identity was thought to be necessary for the appearance of the spirits. It can also be read as a comment on the invisibility and passivity of women in Victorian society, which made them particularly suited to the role of the medium. This interpretation is suggested by the fact that Sophy's sense of her nothingness is prompted by musings on her hair, a traditional symbol of femininity (especially in the works of the pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood).

In addition to the séances, both texts incorporate ghosts, although their ontological status varies. 'The Conjugal Angel' provides what can be referred to as a "ghost proper" in the visitation Sophy Sheekhy has from Arthur Hallam ('CA', 248 – 253) since the character is already dead within the narrative limits of the novella and his presence takes the form 'more or less, of a living man, but a man not breathing, [...]' ('CA', 251). At the next ontological level is the figure of Alfred Tennyson. The fictional figure is still alive at the time of the narrative yet his

presence is almost that of a ghost since for the majority of the novella Tennyson is present only through his poetry and Mrs Jesse's references to their childhood. In Chapter 10, however, Tennyson acquires a physical presence, undeniably that of an old man. Although the fictional Tennyson is alive at this point of the narrative, his incorporation into the text has a more ghostly quality than that of the other characters (excepting Arthur Hallam, of course). This is reinforced by the fact that the chapter is framed by Sophy Sheekhy's image of Tennyson, thus the presence of Tennyson can be seen as a product of Sophy's spiritual mind.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, the presence of the historical figure Emily Jesse (née Tennyson) adds another dimension to this ontological layering of ghosts. Within the ontological world of the novella, the physical reality of Emily Jesse remains unquestioned. Indeed, Emily Jesse is vividly connected to the world of physical materiality through the description of her dog Pug, who was 'insensible to the fluctuations of emotion round the table, and tended to lie snoozing on the couch, occasionally even snoring, or emitting other wet, explosive animal noises at the most sensitive moments' ('CA', 172). Yet Emily's existence takes on a ghostly quality as she is incorporated into Tennyson's *In Memoriam* and her grief for Arthur is appropriated, a process considered in more detail in terms of the strategy of ventriloquism.

Although *Possession* does not have any ghosts of a similar nature as Arthur Hallam, the novel incorporates figures who qualify as ghosts on a different ontological level. Whereas the Victorian figures in 'The Conjugal Angel' are historical figures, known to have had an existence outside Byatt's fictional world, the Victorian characters in *Possession* can make no such claim. Yet they are not entirely

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<sup>18</sup> In her review of the novella, Glendinning mistakenly attributes this vision, as well as that of Arthur Hallam's ghost, to Emily Jesse, 45.

fictional either since Ash is clearly modelled on Robert Browning whilst LaMotte is reminiscent of Christina Rossetti and Emily Dickinson. Indeed, Christina Rossetti's ghost haunts the fictional LaMotte from the outset of the novel as Roland proposes Rossetti as a candidate for the unknown addressee of Ash's unfinished letters (*P*, 7). In some respects, Roland's initial guess proves correct in the numerous resemblances between Christabel LaMotte and Christina Rossetti.<sup>19</sup> The relationship between Byatt's Victorian poets and their historical counterparts has been explored in more detail in terms of her process of ventriloquism and its implications for the texts' interrogation of the boundary between historical and fictional figures.

The Victorian characters haunt and possess the modern characters to the point that Maud and Roland re-enact the plot of Randolph and Christabel.<sup>20</sup> The trip Maud and Roland take to Yorkshire is deliberately designed to enable them to walk in the footsteps of the Victorian poets, which have already been retraced by Cropper. Indeed, they are accompanied by ghostly presences throughout: 'following their certain predecessor and guide, Mortimer Cropper, in his black Mercedes, his predecessor, Randolph Ash, and the hypothetical ghost, Christabel LaMotte' (*P*, 251). The presence of LaMotte is only hypothetical since Cropper had no awareness of, and Roland and Maud no proof of, the possibility that LaMotte accompanied Ash on his trip. Roland and Maud do more than just follow in the footsteps of Ash and LaMotte, however, they replicate them. This is apparent in the description of the two couples walking. Of Roland and Maud we are told 'They paced well together,

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<sup>19</sup> Numerous reviewers identify this connection between the fictional LaMotte and Christina Rossetti and this resemblance was dealt with in Chapter 1 in terms of Byatt's process of ventriloquism. Interestingly, Jay Parini claims that LaMotte's 'life is based on Christina Rossetti' (11). Whilst this assessment gains credence by the association of Blanche with the Pre-Raphaelite school of painting established by Rossetti's brother (a connection pointed out by Kelly, 81) it appears to assume an existence for LaMotte that extends beyond the purely fictional.

<sup>20</sup> Although Val provides the twentieth century counterpart to Ellen Ash the more emancipated position of women in the twentieth century enables her to alter the course of Ellen's plot.



though they didn't notice that; both were energetic striders' (P, 251). The subsequent description of Ash and LaMotte recalls this description, connecting the twentieth-century characters to the nineteenth-century ones. 'They both walked very quickly. "We walk well together," he told her. "Our paces suit."' (P, 280).

Ironically, it is when Maud and Roland decide to escape their Victorian predecessors and 'take a day off from *them*, get out of their story, go and look at something for [themselves]' (P, 268) that they are closest to them. Roland proposes to Maud that they go to Boggle Hole since 'It's a nice word' and 'There's no Boggle Hole in Cropper or the Ash letters' (P, 268). As the reader later discovers, however, Ash and LaMotte had also spent a day 'in a place called the Boggle Hole, where they had gone because they liked the word' (P, 286).

Indeed, the twentieth-century figures seem the more ghostly in the novel as their plot becomes entirely connected to that of the Victorians. Maud herself recognises this after the first day spent reading LaMotte's side of the correspondence at Seal Court: 'This thickened forest, her own humming metal car, her prying curiosity about whatever had been Christabel's life, seemed suddenly to be the ghostly things, feeding on, living through, the young vitality of the past' (P, 136). The twentieth-century characters' ghostly existence in relation to their Victorian predecessors is evident in their very names, which conjure up figures from Victorian fiction. Thus Maud recalls Tennyson's poem, the association reinforced by the fact that she works at the top of Tennyson Tower.<sup>21</sup> Maud is haunted by her namesake as the other characters, especially the male figures, attribute the qualities of Tennyson's Maud to her: 'icily regular, splendidly null' (P, 506). This association hinders

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<sup>21</sup> See Catherine Burgass, *A. S. Byatt's Possession: A Reader's Guide* (London: Continuum, 2002) 27.

Maud's emotional life as she is aware of this response and so pre-empts it in her attitude towards others. Similarly, Roland's name alludes to a Victorian poem, Browning's 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came'. This also associates him with the pseudo-Victorian fiction of the novel as the 'childe' of Browning's poem is recalled by the Childe in Christabel's story 'The Threshold'.<sup>22</sup> Thus, Roland's name connects him to both the pseudo-Victorian poets, and the Victorian poets on whom they are based, revealing the complex interrelations between the historical and pseudo-Victorian poets in Byatt's novel.

The Victorian characters are not only present in the novel through the associations with their twentieth-century counterparts. Although for the most part the Victorian plot is mediated to the reader through their textual remains, there are three occasions when this is not the case, when Byatt directly resurrects the ghosts of the Victorian characters. In Chapter 15, the reader is provided with a direct, unmediated account of Ash and LaMotte's trip to Yorkshire. Although it is initially unclear whether the opening description of 'The man and the woman sat opposite each other in the railway carriage' (*P*, 273) refers to Ash and LaMotte or Roland and Maud, this is soon resolved by the description of Christabel's period dress (*P*, 274).

The second of these instances occurs shortly after the death of Randolph Henry Ash, yet it is not Randolph who is allowed a physical materiality but his wife Ellen. Again, the nature of what is presented is initially unclear, it is preceded by an account from Ellen's journal of the night her husband died and is introduced by a subheading marking the date ('NOVEMBER 27<sup>th</sup> 1889'; *P*, 446) in a similar fashion to Ellen's journal entries. Yet the use of the third person and a different font style

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<sup>22</sup> See Burgass, 28.

indicates to the reader that this is a narrative account of the events, rather than a textual account.

In both instances the Victorian figures appear to have been conjured up by their texts. As I have said, the account of Ellen provided in Chapter 25 follows on from her journal entry and initially adopts the conventions of that genre. Although less immediately apparent, the resurrection of Ash and LaMotte in Chapter 15 is accomplished through poetry as in the preceding chapters Roland and Maud trace Ash and LaMotte's trip to Yorkshire through the allusions in their poems.

In contrast to these two instances, the third occasion in which the Victorian characters are granted a ghostly presence initially seems to be wholly disconnected from their textual remains. Indeed, the encounter is prefaced by the narrator's observation 'There are things which happen and leave no discernible trace, are not spoken or written of, though it would be very wrong to say that subsequent events go on indifferently, all the same, as though such things had never been. Two people met, on a hot May day, and never later mentioned their meeting. This is how it was.' (*P*, 508). Although this observation is undermined in the very act of its inclusion within the narrative, the event still appears to be dissociated from any textual remains.

The scene in the hotel room in the preceding chapter, however, can be read as a séance and so the subsequent appearance of Maia and Ash in the Postscript can be interpreted as an effect of the reading of that letter. Towards the end of the novel all the twentieth-century characters, the various readers in the novel, are drawn together by their desire to know the end of Ash and LaMotte's story. They gather in a hotel room to read the letter exhumed from Ash's grave:

So, in that hotel room, to that strange gathering of disparate seekers and hunters, Christabel LaMotte's letter to Randolph Ash was read aloud, by candlelight, with the wind howling past, and the panes of the windows rattling with the little blows of flying debris as it raced on and on, over the downs (P, 499).

The effect produced by both the candlelight inside and the storm outside the room evokes a sense of other-worldly powers. It transpires that Ash and LaMotte's daughter, Maia, survived and lived with Christabel's sister; since Maia was her great-great-grandmother, Maud is a direct descendent of both Ash and LaMotte. The letter's revelation further enhances the reading of this scene as a séance since it is through this event that Maud is able to connect with her ancestors.

The relationship between the living and the dead in these texts illuminates the relationship Byatt proposes between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a relationship that is experienced as a process of reading. Spiritualism undertakes a process of empirical reading and so its incorporation in these texts becomes a metaphor for the process of reading.<sup>23</sup> This metaphoric connection between spiritualism and reading, however, is problematised in these texts. The relationship of the twentieth century to the nineteenth century is often characterised by a nostalgic desire to recapture a lost age. In her book *On Longing* (1984), Susan Stewart considers the relationship of narratives to origins and objects, which she associates with the 'social disease of nostalgia'.<sup>24</sup> She defines nostalgia as 'a sadness without an object' claiming that 'the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt

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<sup>23</sup> As a form of empirical reading, spiritualism replicates the processes of detection and indeed *Possession* has clear affinities with the genre of detective fiction. See Chris Willis, 'Making the Dead Speak: Spiritualism and Detective Fiction,' *The Art of Detective Fiction*, eds. Warren Chernaik, Martin Swales and Robert Vilain (London: Macmillan, 2000) 60-74.

<sup>24</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1984) ix.

lack'.<sup>25</sup> Stewart's definition of nostalgia aligns it with mourning since mourning is always directed towards an absent object.

This motivation of mourning towards an absence is evident in Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, in which he not only mourns the absence of the physical presence of Arthur but also the absence of the future Arthur. Incorporating Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, a monumental poem of nineteenth-century mourning, into 'The Conjugal Angel' problematises the nostalgic relationship of the twentieth century to the nineteenth-century past by highlighting the complex nature of mourning in the nineteenth century itself. Almost as soon as it was published, *In Memoriam* was recognised as both 'addressing itself especially to its own time' and 'the expression of a cycle of experience common to thoughtful humanity'.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, in contemporary conceptions of the Victorian era, Tennyson's poem has become a synecdoche for Victorian doubt and anxieties concerning religion, especially in the face of scientific developments in the fields of geology and, later, evolutionary biology.

John Morley's fascinating sociological study, *Death, Heaven and the Victorians* (1971), reveals, through an exploration of its rituals, the fraught nature of nineteenth-century mourning. As Morley notes, 'the etiquette of mourning was strict, and the rules intricate; it was easy to make a mistake'.<sup>27</sup> This etiquette, and the anxiety it prompted, was intimately bound up with the class system. As Morley observes 'it was thought as necessary to maintain the status of one's class in death as in life, and, if possible, even to use death as a means of further social

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<sup>25</sup> Stewart, 23.

<sup>26</sup> [Coventry Patmore], 'In Memoriam,' *The North British Review* 13 (1850): 532-55, 554; 'In Memoriam,' *The Eclectic Review* 28 (1850): 330-41, 332.

<sup>27</sup> John Morley, *Death, Heaven and the Victorians* (London: Studio Vista, 1971) 67.



advancement'.<sup>28</sup> This connection between mourning and nostalgia is noted by Franken's summary of reviews of *Possession*. According to Franken, the reviewers consider Byatt to be 'a nostalgic recorder of a time long past' and they read *Possession* as a 'fictional eulogy'.<sup>29</sup> Whilst I would disagree with the assessment of Byatt's novel as nostalgic, the notion of a "fictional eulogy" captures the sense of neo-Victorian fictions' memorialising of the past that I explored in the previous chapter.

In 'The Conjugal Angel' Byatt prioritises the world of the living over the spirit world. The message to Mrs Hearnshaw, Mrs Papagay's motivation for participating in the séances, and Emily Jesse's response to the message from her dead fiancé all concur with this view. But it is not just for the sake of the living that this is proposed. Sophy Sheekhy's vision of Arthur Hallam reveals the damaging effect of the living's preoccupation with the dead on the dead themselves. At the mention of his mourners Sophy observes 'A spasm of anguish twist[ing] the dull red face, and [...] suddenly felt in her blood and bones that the mourning was painful to him. It dragged him down, or back, or under.' ('CA', 250). Spiritualism is revealed as a phenomenon that focuses on the living to the detriment of the dead, the living appear to haunt the dead by refusing to let them go.

Since both the living and the dead characters in this novella belong to the nineteenth century, these observations can elucidate Byatt's attitude towards the nineteenth century. Byatt's approach suggests that a purely mournful or nostalgic approach to the Victorians is damaging; it not only stifles the creativity of the twentieth century but also reduces the complexities within nineteenth-century

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<sup>28</sup> Morley, 11.

<sup>29</sup> Franken, 86.

literature. Rather the Victorian era, and its literature, should be understood in its own terms and in relation to the specific historical conditions of the period. Although both Arthur Hallam and Emily Jesse are literally dead in the world of the reader, their appearances within the novella differ greatly. The ghost of Arthur Hallam manifests as a decaying corpse whereas the figure of Emily Jesse is very much alive and grounded in corporeal reality.

*In Memoriam* seeks to separate the body and the spirit; Tennyson clearly desires the return of Arthur, but not in a bodily form. Rather, Tennyson seeks contact with Arthur's spirit through literature: 'So word by word, and line by line, / The dead man touch'd me from the past' (95 l.33). The appearance of Arthur as a 'dead man' ('CA', 249) in the novella reveals the problems of such an approach. Byatt escapes these problems in her resurrection of Emily Jesse because she recognises the need to revive her physical reality, her historical specificity. Arthur's interdiction against mourning can be interpreted as warning to the reader not to indulge in nostalgia, a form of mourning for a lost way of life, for the nineteenth century, but rather to read its literature in its own terms. This is the approach Byatt herself adopts in her neo-Victorian texts as she seeks to establish the historical specificity of the era she represents and to interpret its literature in relation to it.

Byatt's interweaving of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in *Possession* dramatises the relationship between the two centuries. Although the nineteenth-century characters are present in the novel predominantly through their textual remains they are seen to have a passion that is lacking in the twentieth-century characters.<sup>30</sup> This could be attributed to the nature of the texts; whilst the Victorian

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<sup>30</sup> Of *Possession*, Hulbert claims that 'lives in the age of sexual ultrasophistication turn out to be frigid, and passion thrives in the age of repression'. Ann Hulbert, 'The Great Ventriloquist: A. S.

characters are represented through literary and personal genres (poems, letters, diaries) the twentieth-century characters are represented by critical and professional ones (biography, literary criticism, scholarly footnotes).

Moreover, certain of the nineteenth-century texts only acquire this sense of urgency in light of the poets' personal lives. LaMotte's poem about "Dolly" initially seems an inconsequential and sentimental poem yet when Maud recites it in LaMotte's old bedroom it is conferred with significance 'like a treasure-hunt clue' (P, 83). Despite this suggestion that it is the personal lives of the poets which gives life to their literature, the instances in which the nineteenth-century characters are resurrected suggests the opposite, that it is literature that gives life to the figures of the past. In all three cases in which the nineteenth-century characters appear to have a separate existence from their textual remains their presence is still prompted by texts. Both the scenes of Ash and LaMotte in Yorkshire and Ellen Ash after her husband's death are preceded by textual accounts, directly so in the case of Ellen. Whilst the Postscript initially seems entirely removed from literature, the preceding chapter depicts the twentieth-century characters reading the buried letter from LaMotte to Ash.

In contrast to *Possession*, 'The Conjugal Angel' is not framed by a twentieth-century story and so the appearances of the ghosts are not prompted by textual accounts in the same way. Literature is explicitly connected to spiritualism, however, since Sophy Sheekhy uses it as a way to induce her trances. Indeed, prior to the appearance of Arthur Hallam's ghost, Sophy is reciting Keats's 'The Eve of St Agnes' ('CA', 248). As a consequence of this recitation Sophy becomes aware of

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Byatt's *Possession: A Romance*, 'Contemporary British Women Writers: Texts and Strategies', Ed. Robert E. Hosmer Jnr. (London: Macmillan, 1993) 55–64, 56. See also Donna Rifkind, 'Victoria's Secrets,' rev. of *Possession*, by A. S. Byatt *The New Criterion* 9.6 (1991): 77–80, 79.

the spiritual presence in her room: ‘Whatever was behind her sighed, and then drew in its breath, with difficulty. Sophy Sheekhy told him dubiously, “I *think* you are there. I should like to see you”’ (‘CA’, 248).

The intertextual presence of Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* highlights the significance of this association between literature and spiritualism. Tennyson’s poem had become a great mouthpiece for the spiritual anxiety of the Victorian era and as such seems an appropriate medium through which spirits should speak. As Emily Jesse observes “‘The spirits often speak to us through that poem, it seems to be a particular favourite with them, and not only in this house, where it has its natural central place in our thoughts, but in many others, many others”’ (‘CA’, 204). Indeed, Emily Jesse’s interest in spiritualism can be seen as a response to her brother’s poem, a chance for her to commune with Arthur in the way that Alfred Tennyson seems to have done.

### **Ghostwriting: Literature and Spiritualism**

Literature can also be seen as a form of ghostwriting in itself. In ‘The Conjugal Angel’ Sophy Sheekhy uses poetry as a way to communicate with the dead through the inducement of spiritual trances. Yet poetry provides direct communication with the dead in that it raises the voice of a speaker long dead. Thus, in the case of ‘The Conjugal Angel’ it could be argued that the appearance of Alfred Tennyson in Chapter 10 is not a result of Sophy’s conjuring powers, but rather the reader’s, inspired by the continued presence of *In Memoriam* throughout the novella. Tennyson’s poem itself not only allows for the possibilities of communing with the dead through literature but seems to prioritise the role of literature in this process:

So word by word, and line by line,

The dead man touch'd me from the past,  
And all at once it seem'd at last  
The living soul was flash'd on mine, (95 l.33-36; 'CA', 266).

Interestingly, this lyric was altered from 'His living soul was flashed on mine, / And mine in his was wound' to the less specific '*The* living soul' and 'mine in *this* was wound' ('CA', 266). This alteration is commented on by the narrator in Byatt's novella: 'He had changed it. He had felt the first reading gave a wrong impression. He believed his trance *did* mean that he was whirled up and rapt into the Great Soul, of which perhaps both Arthur and himself were a part' ('CA', 266). Tennyson's *In Memoriam* not only serves to resurrect the poet himself but can also be held accountable for the presence of Arthur Hallam in the novella. Arthur Hallam is the absence that haunts *In Memoriam* and the very act of remembrance evoked by the poem could explain the manifestation of his ghost to Sophy.

In *Possession*, Ash muses on this connection between literature and spiritualism in the description of his poetic method: '*I myself, [...] have ventriloquised, have lent my voice to, and mixt my life with, those past voices and lives whose resuscitation in our own lives as warnings, as examples, as the life of the past persisting in us, is the business of every thinking man and woman*' (P, 104).

This connection is highlighted by Ash's choice of Lazarus, the man Jesus supposedly raised from the dead, as the subject for one of his poems. This poem connects Ash with the Victorian poets with whom he is most often associated, Browning and Tennyson: Browning's 'An Epistle Containing the Strange Medical Experience of Karshish, the Arab Physician' presents the speaker's musings on the story of Lazarus and lyric 31 of Tennyson's *In Memoriam* similarly addresses the subject of Lazarus, 'a man raised up by Christ' (l. 13).



The connection between literature and spiritualism must also take into account the process of automatic or passive writing. This is illustrated most fully in 'The Conjugal Angel', which incorporates samples of the automatic writing produced through the medium of Mrs Papagay. The fact that it is Mrs Papagay who produces these writings raises another important element of spiritualism with which Byatt is concerned, the issue of gender. Women were thought to be the best receptacles for spiritual messages since they were by nature, supposedly, passive creatures. Thus, it is unsurprising that it is through the female's pen that the spirits speak in automatic writing. Yet the central role occupied by women within spiritualist circles also indicates a way in which they could at least temporarily escape from their confined existence as Victorian domestic angels.<sup>31</sup> As my discussion of Sophy's trances has shown, however, the only escape route from the confining stereotype of domestic angel was that of a medium whose own identity had to be effaced, the mediums almost have to become ghosts themselves.

That spiritual activity provided an alternative to the usual sphere of existence for Victorian women is illustrated by Mrs Papagay's motivations. As a widow, Mrs Papagay recognises that 'She could not bear to sit and gossip of bonnets and embroidery and the eternal servant problem, she wanted life. And this traffic with the dead was the best way to know, to observe, to love the living [...]' ('CA', 171). Ironically, communing with the dead provides Mrs Papagay with the opportunity to fulfil her desire to experience life, an impulse that at another, later time might have been satisfied through 'a university training in philosophy or psychology or

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<sup>31</sup> Whilst spiritualism provided an escape from the social construction of femininity it simultaneously reinscribed them within conventional womanhood. As Owen argues 'the "innate" femininity which allowed women to accede to positions of power [as mediums] [...] then trapped them within a limiting self-definition [...]', xii.

medicine' ('CA', 170). The process of automatic writing provides Mrs Papagay with access to language that her position as a middle-class lady would otherwise have prohibited. Mrs Papagay's interest in narratives is unable to profit her financially since 'her skills in language were unequal to it, or the movement of the pen in purposeful public writing inhibited her [...]' ('CA', 168). Yet automatic writing provides linguistic freedom:

Her respectable fingers wrote out imprecations in various languages she knew nothing of, and never sought to have translated, for she knew well enough *approximately* what they were, with their fs and cons and cuns, Arturo's little words of fury, Arturo's little words, also, of intense pleasure ('CA', 169).

Once again though, it is a limited liberation as Mrs Papagay can only achieve linguistic freedom by appropriating the voice of her husband.

Although *Possession* is not as overtly concerned with the gender politics of spiritualism, the greater involvement of LaMotte and Blanche with spiritualist circles indicates an awareness of the gendered nature of spiritualism. Importantly, Ash's *Mummy Possest* reflects the gender issues surrounding spiritualism in reversing the gender positions of its intertextual model; Browning's 'Mr Sludge' focuses on a male medium, a figure believed to be based on D. D. Home, whilst Ash's poem reflects the more fraught position of female mediums within spiritualist circles.<sup>32</sup>

In *Possession*, the connection between literature and spiritualism is indicated by the multiple meanings of the novel's title. Whilst "possession" can obviously have a spiritual interpretation, in the context of the novel it also refers to the desire for the possession of the past, a desire that manifests itself through the ownership of texts. Thus, the title of Byatt's novel encodes the metaphoric relationship between

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<sup>32</sup> The relationship between Ash's and Browning's spiritualist poems was analysed in Chapter 1 in terms of the process of ventriloquism.

literature and spiritualism that is interrogated in the course of the novel itself.

Comparing her own work to Peter Ackroyd's *The House of Doctor Dee* (1993), Byatt remarks that 'the genre of the ghost story is used as an embodiment of the relations between readers and writers, between the living words of dead men and the modern conjurers of their spirits'.<sup>33</sup> Byatt's texts enact a process of resurrection by enabling readers to connect with the texts of the past; indeed, she recognises that the relationship to the past is always constituted through reading its textual remains.

In the course of *Possession* Byatt presents competing models of reading through the twentieth-century characters, who variously engage in biographical, scholarly, theoretical and psychoanalytic readings. Towards the end, the novel presents a circle of readers, which incorporates not only all the representatives of the "professional" models of reading but also representatives of personal readings, in the figure of Maud who, it transpires, has been reading her family history. Thus, Byatt proposes that the ideal reading approach would be a composite of the various models of reading represented in the novel. Moreover, the fact that this scene resembles a séance highlights the need to converse with the past through reading its texts. For as long as readers engage in this communication with past literature, their authors will continue to have an after-life and it is this active engagement with nineteenth-century literature that Byatt's texts seek to revive.

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<sup>33</sup> A. S. Byatt, *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays*, (London: Chatto and Windus, 2000): 43.

## Conclusion

Critical considerations of neo-Victorian fiction tend to promote its postmodern context at the expense of the Victorian context. As I have shown throughout this thesis, whilst it is important to consider neo-Victorian fiction within the context of postmodernism it cannot be subsumed into that category and needs to be conceived of as a separate and distinct genre. Accounts of postmodernism tend to prioritise the supposed lack of interest in history within postmodern texts. Yet neo-Victorian fiction is committed to recreating the historical specificity of the Victorian era. Consequently, accounts such as Jameson's of the "historical deafness" of postmodern fiction and Huyssen's condemnation of its gleeful celebration of the fictionality of history, are unable to accommodate the commitment to historical specificity within neo-Victorian fiction. Linda Hutcheon's theory of "historiographic metafiction" provides a more complex examination of postmodern fiction, proposing that the dual impulses of self-reflexive fictionality and a commitment to historical conditions co-exist within these texts.

Whilst providing a useful starting point, Hutcheon's theory had to be refined to account for the particular form this takes within neo-Victorian fiction. For Hutcheon, the historiographic and metafictional impulses co-exist but never overlap; in neo-Victorian fiction, however, they are inextricably interrelated. The Victorian context is integral to the treatment of historical narratives; the questioning of the modes of narrating the past is grounded in a consideration of the Victorian forms of those narratives. The Victorian context of these texts is the crucial element, but it is often overlooked within reviews and critical accounts. Whilst not ignoring the

supposedly “postmodern” elements of these texts I have traced their connections with Victorian fiction and their treatment of Victorian forms of historical narratives.

Although most accounts of these texts seek to assert their postmodern status, some reviews focus purely on the continuities they establish with Victorian forms. Levenson, for instance, claims that Byatt is trying ‘to get back before the moderns and revive a Victorian project that has never been allowed to come to completion’.<sup>1</sup> Such an approach wrongly positions neo-Victorian fiction as simply imitating Victorian forms and fails to account for the dual focus of these texts, specifically their self-consciousness about their own historical position. Contrary to Levenson’s claim, neo-Victorian fictions do not erase subsequent literary developments and nostalgically return to the Victorian era; indeed, their commitment to the historical specificity of the nineteenth century precludes such an approach. This commitment to the specificity of the historical referent extends to the twentieth century; they are not only aware of but also incorporate subsequent developments in literary forms. Unlike many television and film productions, which do seem to promote a nostalgic return to the Victorian era, neo-Victorian fiction remains aware of the differences between the two historical moments they evoke.

This thesis has provided an account of the forms of realism in nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature. The commitment to the historically specific forms of Victorian fiction can be seen in neo-Victorian fiction’s engagement with the conventions of realism. Neo-Victorian fiction challenges popular misconceptions surrounding realism that posit it as a naïve and simplistic mode of literature. In their intertextual allusions to Victorian novels, neo-Victorian fictions highlight the

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Levenson, ‘The Religion of Fiction,’ rev. of *Angels and Insects*, by A. S. Byatt, *New Republic* 209 (22 Aug 1993): 41-44, 41.



complex and sophisticated ways in which Victorian authors engaged with the conventions of realism. Chapter 2 explored the treatment of the realist narrator in neo-Victorian fiction, which prompted a consideration of the realist narrator in the “classic realist” text of the Victorian era. As I demonstrated, in problematising the figure of the realist narrator, neo-Victorian fictions reveal and challenge the common misperceptions of the Victorian realist narrator, specifically the contention that they are an omniscient authority that confidently believes in the possibilities of realist depiction. In Chapter 3 I examined specific Victorian responses to conventions for closure, revealing that the supposedly closed and traditional endings of Victorian realist novels were actually as self-conscious and open as postmodern fictions claim to be.

Considering the forms of realism in neo-Victorian fiction forces a re-examination of its conventions in Victorian fiction; which should be understood in their historically specific context. Consequently, the categorisation of texts as “Victorian” or “postmodern” is challenged and the limitations of those categories are revealed. Neo-Victorian fiction can be understood neither as “postmodern” nor as “Victorian” literature. Rather in its double relationship, neo-Victorian fiction engages with both postmodern and Victorian forms of narrative and undermines the construction of a literary history based on a teleological movement from “simple” Victorian forms of literature to more complex postmodern ones.

Moreover, these texts also reject a nostalgic approach which sees Victorian fiction as the high point of the novel form and postmodern fiction as a falling away from that standard. Rather they are committed to the distinct historical contexts of these forms and to establishing both the continuities and discontinuities between

Victorian and contemporary modes of narrative. Consequently, they refuse to impose any values judgements on either mode. This corresponds to my own approach towards neo-Victorian and Victorian fiction. Whilst I consider neo-Victorian fictions in relation to their Victorian predecessors I maintain that they are historically distinct forms that should be understood in their specific historical locations. Assessing the forms in relation to each other actually severs the intimate double relationship that exists between them by seeking to prioritise one form over the other. Thus whilst neo-Victorian and Victorian fiction should not be judged comparatively, they do need to be understood in relation to each other.

Consequently, this thesis has not adopted a nostalgic approach, which valorises Victorian literature as the golden age of the novel and positions any subsequent productions as necessarily inferior. Nor has it adopted an evolutionist attitude that presents Victorian fiction as an earlier stage in the development of the novel, which has reached its high point in the sophisticated productions of the postmodern era. Both narratives place Victorian fiction in opposition to neo-Victorian fiction and attempt to judge between them. Rather than judging between these forms, I have explored the complex double relationship that exists between them. Restoring the Victorian context to these texts provides a way to read neo-Victorian fiction that resists simply consigning them to yet another form of postmodern fiction that plays with the concepts of history and fiction. As I have shown, the interrogation of historical and fictional narratives is intimately tied to the specific historical formation of these texts; the examination of historical narratives is grounded in a consideration of the specific Victorian forms of those narratives. Considering neo-Victorian fiction provides a means for addressing the existence of

supposedly postmodern features within Victorian fiction, which ultimately leads to a more complex view of Victorian fiction. Yet its commitment to the historical context of such forms forestalls the assessment of Victorian fiction as “proto-postmodernist”. Instead, this double relationship challenges the categories of “Victorian” and “postmodern” and reveals the evolutionist assumptions of the narrative of literary history.

In treating a range of neo-Victorian texts that span several decades I have addressed the variations that exist within the genre of neo-Victorian fiction. Fowles’s neo-Victorian novel adopts a slightly different approach to the others and so a consideration of how it differs will help formulate conclusions concerning neo-Victorian fiction. Whilst the other texts are keen to avoid passing judgement on the Victorians, *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* seems more willing to engage in such a process. The twentieth-century narrator often adopts a position of superiority over the Victorian characters he depicts, and even the Victorian modes of narration he engages with are devalued in relation to modern forms. As I have demonstrated in Chapter 2 the denigration of the realist narrator depends on an exaggeration of that mode, necessary for the twentieth-century narrator to claim that his approach is both new and experimental. Thus Fowles’s novel is more complicit with stereotypical assumptions about the forms of Victorian novels. Yet Fowles recognises that the Victorian era cannot be captured through the stereotypes of it and indeed, as discussed in Chapter 1, he prioritises actual Victorian poetry over his own ventriloquism of it.

The difference between Fowles’s project and that of the other writers has been noted by Byatt, she explicitly distances her neo-Victorian novels from ‘modern

diminishing parodies like those of Fowles'.<sup>2</sup> In asserting this difference, Byatt is highlighting the values judgement that is implicit in Fowles' text. Yet whilst the narrator of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* often adopts a superior attitude towards the Victorian characters, Victorian literature is valued over the postmodern forms within the novel. Thus Byatt's criticism of Fowles' text does not seem to take account of the nuances of his attitude towards the Victorian past. Moreover, whilst I accept that Fowles and Byatt do adopt different stances in their neo-Victorian texts, I do not want to reconstruct these differences into a teleological narrative of the development of neo-Victorian fiction. Rather the differences between these neo-Victorian fictions reveal that neo-Victorian fiction, like the Victorian literature it engages with, cannot be reduced to a monolithic category but instead incorporates a variety of possible responses and approaches to the Victorian era.

Neo-Victorian fiction reinserts Victorian forms of narrative, both historical and literary, into their specific cultural context. Part of the historical context of neo-Victorian fiction is the continued cultural legacy of the Victorian era, a legacy that is usually ignored in accounts of postmodernism. By self-consciously engaging with the Victorian past neo-Victorian fiction examines the continued presence of Victorian forms within contemporary society. Neo-Victorian texts adopt a dual focus; even those wholly located in the Victorian era subtly inscribe a self-conscious awareness of their position within the twentieth century. Thus, a full examination of neo-Victorian fiction, such as that begun in this thesis, must replicate this dual approach and explore both the twentieth- and nineteenth-century contexts within which these texts operate.

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<sup>2</sup> A. S. Byatt, *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2000) 79.

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